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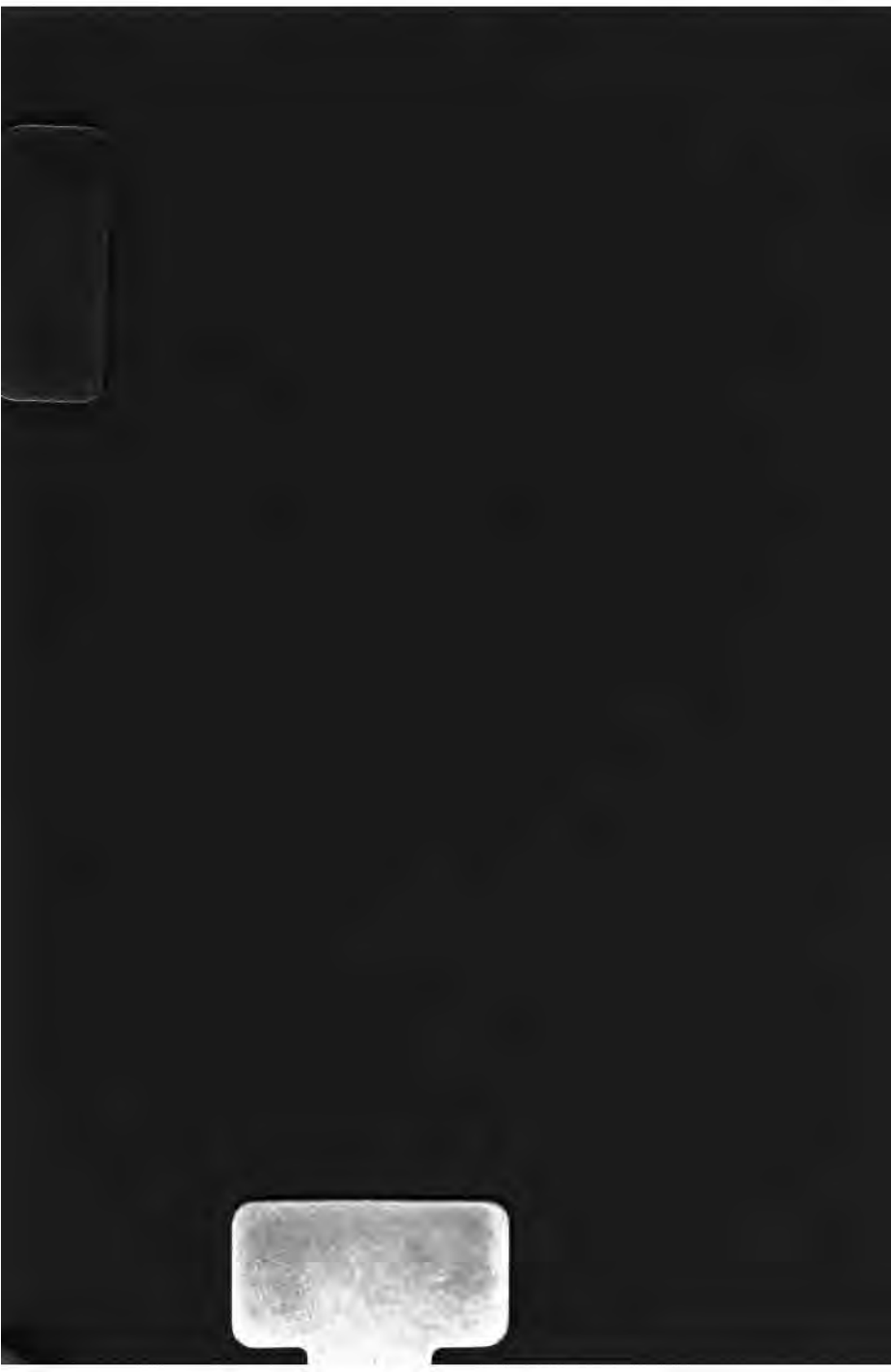
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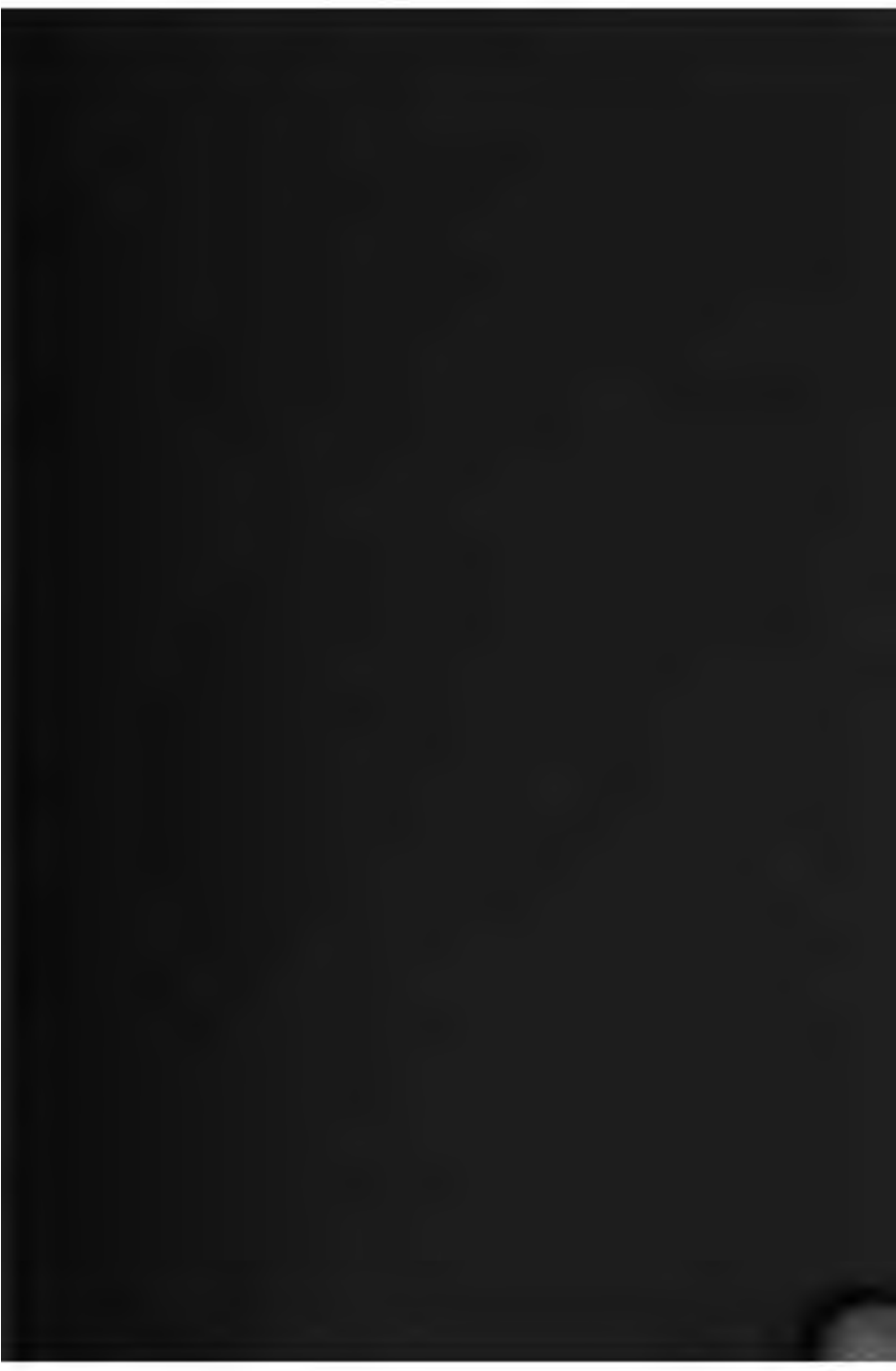
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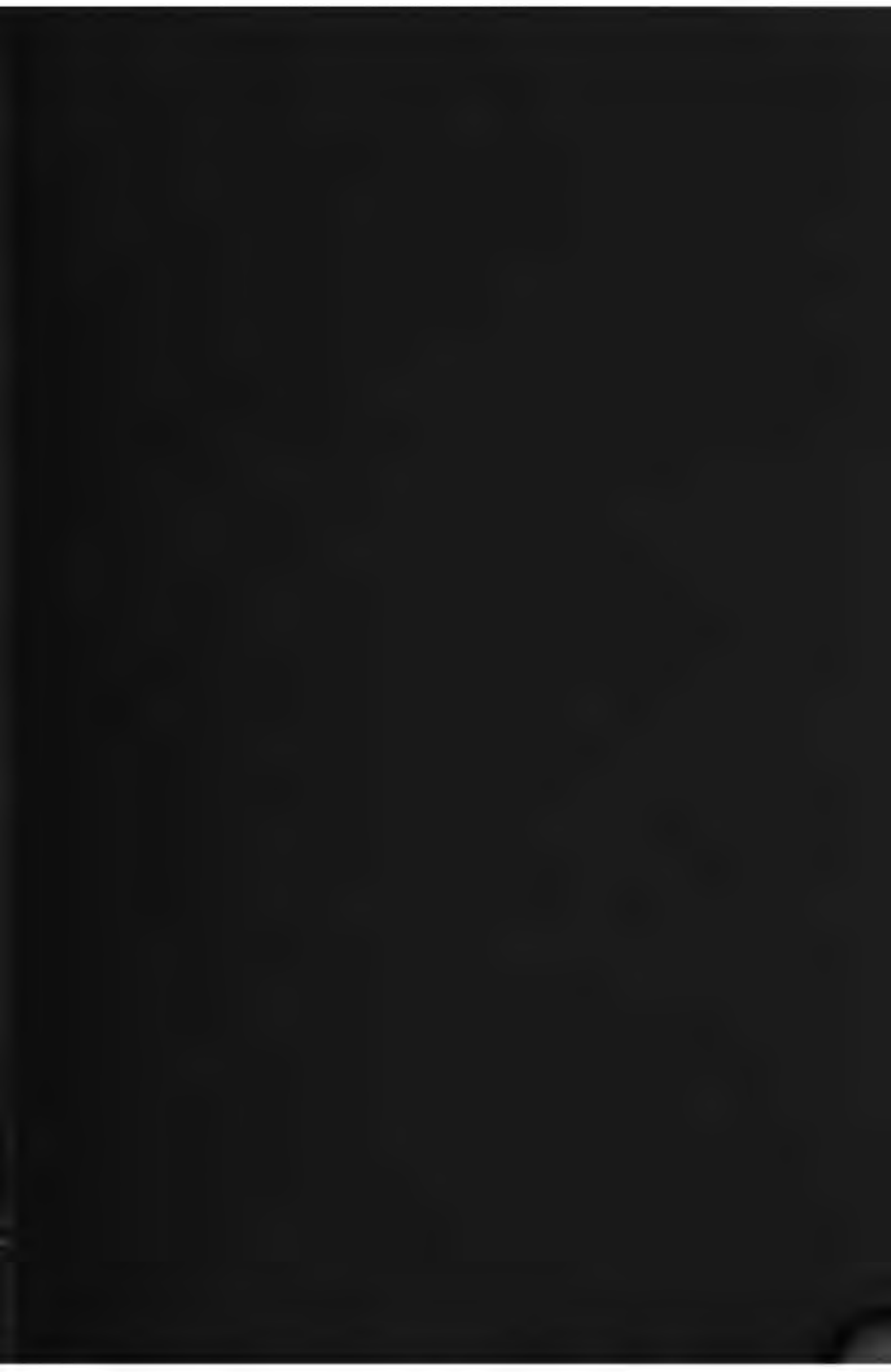






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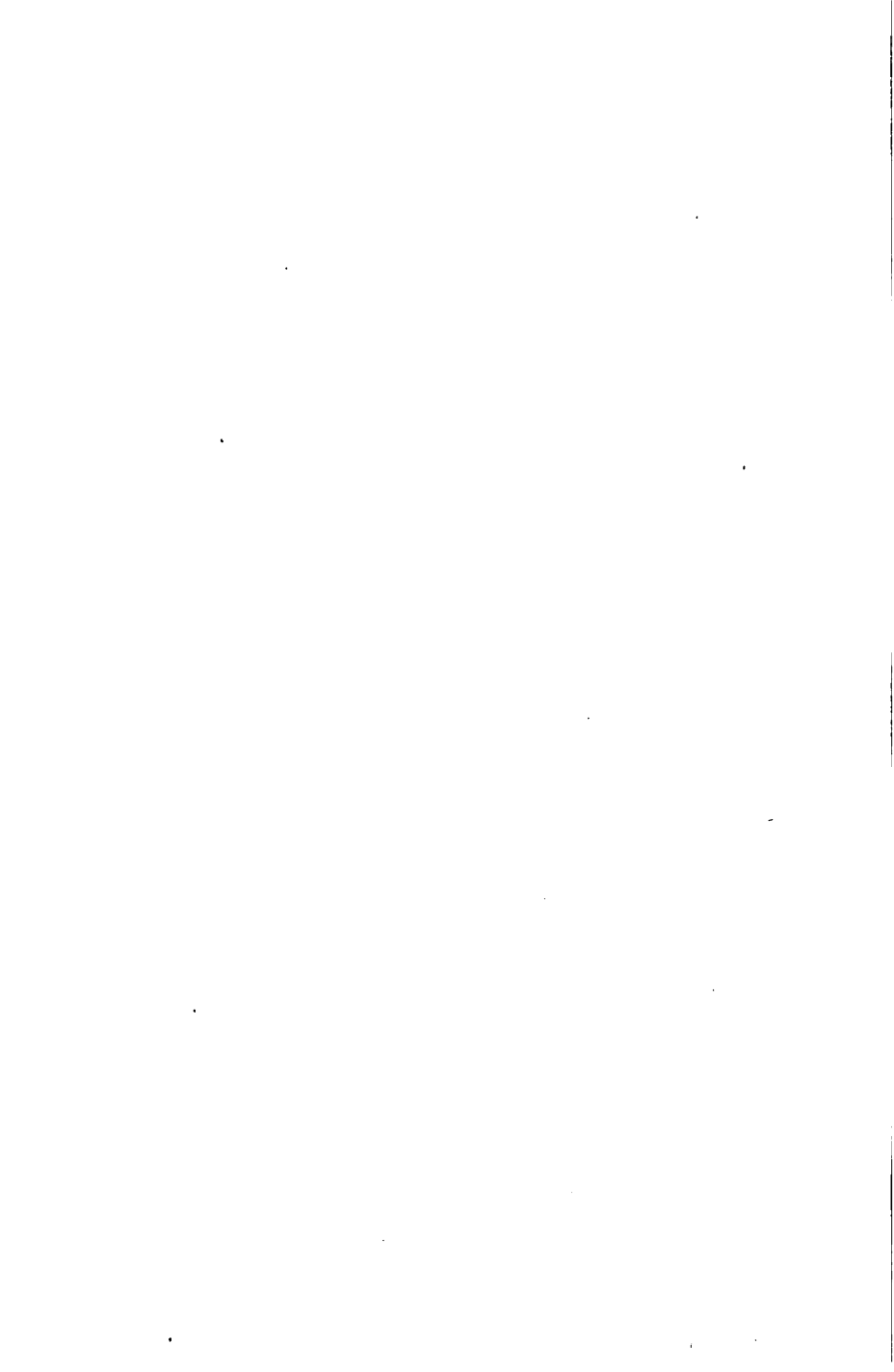
155



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CONTENTS.

CHAP.	PAGE
I.—“ WHY DON’T YOU SPEAK FOR YOURSELF, JOHN ? ”	1
II.—THE CAPTAIN’S LITTLE DAUGHTER	16
III.—AT ODDS—CHECK!	27
IV.—A DOUBLE MISUNDERSTANDING	40
V.—“ THEN TRUST ME ALL IN ALL, OR NOT AT ALL.”	57
VI.—THE MAN UNMASKED	71
VII.—IN HIS ROOM AT NIGHT	84
VIII.—MURDERED!	95
IX.—THE VICAR’S THEORY	109
X.—“ A LIE WHICH IS HALF A TRUTH IS A HARDER MATTER TO FIGHT ”	125
XI.—COMMITTED FOR TRIAL	143
XII.—THE SALVATION CAPTAIN, JANE	156
XIII.—WHY SHE LEFT THEM	172
XIV.—A HOPELESS SEARCH	187
XV.—ON TRIAL FOR HIS LIFE	200
XVI.—THE VERDICT	209



AN INNOCENT MAIDEN.



CHAPTER I.

“WHY DON’T YOU SPEAK FOR YOURSELF, JOHN?”

THEY were two women in an old-fashioned room of an old-fashioned house at Kew—a room softly carpeted in sweet-smelling Indian matting and Persian rugs, with quaint spindle-legged furniture, and a quainter Chinese paper covered with scrolly red monsters and monstrous gold flowers tangled up together; a room with a high wooden wainscot and mantelpiece, the latter carved with cherubs carrying wreaths of flowers; and hosts of tiny tables heaped with treasures of Sèvres and Nankin china, Hindu idols, and Burmese knick-knacks in bewildering confusion.

“I call it most undignified, unladylike, and unseemly,” said the elder woman.

“*Mrs. Pentreath!*”

“Yes, my dear, and if you were to say ‘Mrs. Pentreath’ twice as loudly, and look twice as red and indignant, I should only repeat the same words. Indeed I do not know any others better suited to such foolish and imprudent conduct.”

“But I don’t even know what you mean,” cried the

girl, redder than ever at the snub she had received. "What is there in my conduct that you can call by such names as 'unseemly and unladylike'? What have I done? You have no right to speak to me so, because—because——"

"Because you are a motherless girl for whose welfare and reputation I am answerable while you live under my roof; and because your father committed you to my care," said Mrs. Pentreath, slowly. "Excuse my interrupting you, Hetty, but I am of opinion that these reasons do give me a right, not only to express my opinion on your conduct generally, but to exert my authority if I find you persisting in a course which is sure to be detrimental to you in every way. Ernest may be silly in some things—I am sorry to say he is—but you are more silly still if you let yourself think that he means to marry you."

"I don't; I never thought anything of the sort. I wouldn't marry *him*. Mrs. Pentreath, why don't you send me away if you think such things? Indeed, I would far, far rather go than listen to them."

"Go, so that you may induce him to follow you? Yes, Hetty, that would be just of a piece with the running after him at present, the familiarity and forwardness of which I am complaining. Let me tell you I am not the only person who has noticed it. Lady Carisfort spoke to me some time ago about what she rightly considered my foolish and culpable indulgence, and Mr. Hamilton——"

"Mr. Hamilton!" The poppy-red cheeks grew suddenly white, and even Mrs. Pentreath was startled by the strange look, half anguish, half indignation,

which flashed from the brown eyes. "You do not mean that. . . He couldn't—I am sure he never spoke about me and—and Captain Pentreath!"

Mrs. Pentreath smiled with a sort of chilling composure very aggravating.

"Then you are quite wrong, my dear, for it was only yesterday that he was doing so, and regretting the way in which you were going on; and I am glad to see that you have some regard for your clergyman's opinion, if not for mine. You must remember, however, that George Hamilton and Ernest are cousins, and that young men are in the habit of speaking freely to one another, especially of girls who by their own lightness have——What is it, Hickson—the carriage? Very well, I am coming; and, Hetty, don't be silly. It is no use crying in that violent way as if someone had ill-used you. I assure you that you ought to feel grateful that you have someone to act a mother's part to you; and though Ernest is my son, it is not at all in his interests, but yours, that I have spoken to you to-day."

Mrs. Pentreath said this in a softened tone, perhaps because her conscience told her that she had been somewhat harsh, perhaps because the attitude of the culprit, sobbing now beyond control, with her face hidden in her dimpled hands, touched her sense of pity; but she went away for her drive all the same, a stately old lady, with her white hair and fine face, and the furs and velvets which shrouded her still upright figure. And Hetty Mavors was left to cry on by herself.

She made a pretty picture so, despite her woe, with her slender, childish figure, and soft dark head pressed

up against the panelling of the deep old window-seat, behind her a fence of tall ragged chrysanthemums, red and saffron tinted, and filling the air with their bitter-sweet odour; and behind them a flutter of brown and yellow autumn leaves and the stainless blue of one of those rare days in November when winter seems still far away, and the fair, wan effigy of summer lies lightly on the moist ground, unburied save in fallen leaves.

Hetty, however, was far from thinking of herself in an artistic light. Perhaps she was deficient in "culture," or perhaps she was too miserable; anyhow, she never lifted her face, but sobbed on till startled into another position by a footstep at her side and a voice saying:

"They told me I should find you here, so—— Why, Hetty! Hetty, my child, what is the matter?"

Hetty lifted her face quickly enough then—not in welcome, however, but with a look of such unmistakable anger flashing through her tears as fairly startled the visitor, a rather plain young man in clerical dress, but with a frank, kindly expression which seemed far from warranting the indignant one which greeted him. Yet, though the girl was trembling in every limb, she made a strong effort to control herself, and stood up, saying coldly:

"Mrs. Pentreath is not in, Mr. Hamilton."

"So Hickson told me; but as he added that you were in the drawing-room, I thought I might come in and see you. I had no idea you were in trouble, however. Is it—is it anything I could help you in, or would you rather I went away?" the vicar asked quietly and with a certain plain directness, and absence of

society pretence, which made Hetty's efforts at composure somewhat difficult.

Yet she answered him as directly and with the same coldness as before :

"I would rather you went away. People who make trouble can hardly help in it : and as it seems that I have to thank you for mine, I would rather you did not stay to triumph in it."

"Make trouble ! Triumph ! I don't think I understand you," said George Hamilton. He had become very pale, strikingly so in contrast to the crimson cheeks which confronted him, but he still spoke quietly, and stood his ground, facing the girl with a calm steadiness which was not without its effect. "How have I got you into trouble ? I was not aware that I had done so ; but if I have, it must have been, as you know perfectly well, so purely accidentally that I hope you are generous enough to feel as sorry for me as I am for you."

The grave, reasonable tone made Hetty's eyes misty again.

"Oh, it does not matter," she said, trying to speak lightly ; then breaking down with ignominious speed : "Only I did not think, I *did not*, that you—you——"

"That I what ? Hetty, my—my dear child, for Heaven's sake don't cry, but tell me what I have done. Don't you know—God knows you might by this time—that I would sooner cut off my right arm than hurt you by a pin-prick or see anyone else do it. What is it ? Has Pentreath——"

But Hetty, looking up with hot cheeks and flashing eyes, broke in on the question with sharp distinctness.

"Captain Pentreath has said and done nothing—nothing at all. I don't believe he would ever think such things. He knows too well how shameful and untrue they are."

"What things, Hetty?" This young girl certainly required a good deal of patience, but it was not lack of that quality which made George Hamilton's grave face graver, and his voice colder than before.

"What Mrs. Pentreath and you have been saying, that I run after——" but Hetty was sobbing too violently now for her words to be very intelligible, and the vicar could only catch such broken phrases as "forward," "wanting to marry him," "unladylike," the rest drowned in passionate blushes hot enough to almost scorch the tears which flowed over them. Mr. Hamilton's brown face flushed for sympathy. Manlike, however, he wasted no words on it, but went to the point at once.

"I never said one word of the sort," he said. "What's more, I never thought, dreamt, or implied it. Has my aunt told you so? I can't believe it; and, if you'll excuse me, I don't believe you do either. You look on me as a friend, I suppose. It isn't much to expect after all these years, but I do expect that. Do you think friends lie and calumniate one another? Tell me at once what you mean."

Hetty's sobs ceased. She was very young. She was quelled by an anger greater than her own; subdued too by a certain delicious joy springing up in her bruised and wounded little heart. She looked up at him quite deprecatingly.

"It was Mrs. Pentreath said so. She was angry at

something—such a little thing. Captain Pentreath asked me to cut him a sprig of gardenia from the conservatory before he went out this morning, and when I went for it he came in after me, and stood talking for a minute or two while he pinned it in. After he was gone your aunt began, and said all this. I couldn't even understand her at first, or why she was so angry; and then she said Lady Carisfort had spoken to her some time ago about my—my conduct, and you too."

"My aunt made a mistake," said the vicar, coolly. "What Lady Carisfort may have said of you I don't know; nor do I think it matters much, as she is well known to be the most vicious-tongued old woman in the county; but since it has come to this, and you have been made unhappy, I owe it to myself to tell you what I said."

"Then you did say something!" Hetty's tone had an almost childish accent of disappointment, and her eyes began to look angry again.

"I certainly did. My aunt came to me yesterday and told me—it is her fault and yours, mind you, Miss Mavors, that you ever hear this—told me that she was disturbed in her mind, because she thought that her son was beginning to show a disposition to pay you idle attentions, and that you were encouraging him under the impression that they were serious. She added, however, that she did not blame you as much as her son, because you were very young——"

"She is very kind, and I am much obliged to her," said Hetty, haughtily.

"And rather spoilt."

"Then it is she who has spoilt me, and why did she?

I wish" (beginning to cry) "that she hadn't. I thought she was—was fond of me, as fond as I was of her."

"But that people were beginning to make remarks. Someone had even asked her if her son was going to marry little Miss Mavors, and as, of course, no one could know better than she that he had not the faintest idea of the sort—forgive me, Hetty, and remember I am only quoting her words—she came to me to consult me as to the best means of putting a stop to an affair which was giving her trouble and might damage your name. She said she did not at all wish to part from you even for a time——"

"To send me away, you mean! but I will not give her the trouble. I will go away. I am going at once," Hetty burst in, vehemently; then with a sudden change of tone: "And you? What did you say? You are only telling me Mrs. Pentreath's part, not yours."

"I said that I thought she was mistaken," said the vicar, speaking with great distinctness, though with a frown on his brow which implied a difficulty for the task. "For, to commence at the commencement, it was my opinion that her son, instead of '*beginning*' to pay you idle attentions now, had done nothing else but pay you the most marked ones in his power from the first day of his coming here and devote himself to you in a way which might warrant any innocent girl in believing herself to be loved by him. Further, that I should like to know her grounds for thinking that Ernest did not do so; and further to remind her that men seldom took even their mothers into their confidence when they first began to think seriously of a

woman; and that even if Ernest had been rather given to flirting in past times, it was my opinion that your sweetness and—I mean your manner and charms altogether," put in the vicar, interrupting himself in a rough, impatient manner, "were enough to give any man a fair reason for breaking through all previous dislike to matrimony and——"

"Oh, but that was nonsense, and you ought not to tell it me again. Don't go on with that part," said Hetty hurriedly, but with such a lovely rose-colour in her cheeks, and such a lovely shy, questioning glance, as would have made any one think it was just that part she did want told to her. The vicar thought so, and for a moment his pulses beat with marvellous, almost dangerous rapidity; then the remembrance of why she felt such pleasure in his speech came back to him, and he answered her in a colder tone than before:

"Well, that was what I said to my aunt, and I took the liberty of adding, in conclusion, that if she were right in her opinion of her son, and he were capable of laying himself out to win the affections of a young girl without any other end than his own amusement, he deserved to be kicked round Kew Green, and I should be very glad to lend a foot for the—— But there's no use in repeating all that," cried the vicar, cooling down suddenly from the hot anger which merely quoting his words had roused in him, "and I shall only make you as angry as I did her. You must try to forgive me, however, for I was merely arguing on a hypothetical case. You are not to take Mrs. Pentreath's opinion of her son as mine. Probably, indeed, you don't need either of them, and are only

laughing at our presumption in having any. That's not to the point, however. You accused me of having spoken ill and insultingly of you, and of having got you into trouble. I have told you what I did say, and if, hearing it, you still think you were right to greet me as you did just now, I can only say I am sorry for it, and wish I had said nothing at all."

"But I don't. It was I who was wrong, and—and I beg your pardon, Mr. Hamilton. There! Now please don't hurry away," cried Hetty, with the prettiest mingling possible of submission and impatience. "There is something more I want to ask you, if you don't mind."

"Well, what is it? I will tell you anything that concerns myself."

"And *myself*! Mr. Hamilton, I want to know why you think your cousin really cares for me. His mother does not. She said the idea was absurd; but you—you differed from her. Why?"

The vicar looked embarrassed. In honest truth he had not much faith in the depth of his cousin's affection for anybody, but how could he tell the girl so—he of all men?

"I differed from her, certainly," he said with some hesitation; "partly because it would be a tacit impertinence to you to assume that any man would dare to single you out and appropriate you as Pentreath does without caring for you, and partly because—well, because I cannot realise that any man should live in the house with you and not do so."

The vicar's voice had grown so hard that the last words, if intended for a compliment, sounded more

like an accusation. Did he too suspect her of intentional fascination?

Poor Hetty's face grew pale and wistful as a chidden child.

"Oh, but you only mean in a certain way," she said eagerly; a pleasant friendly sort of caring that no one need dislike. Of course I know he is more demonstrative than some men, and—and says silly things now and then; but I do assure you he has never said one word which—which anyone could take hold of."

The vicar looked at her in surprise. Evidently she was not so sure of her lover's affection as he had thought, or she would not want so much reassuring on the subject. He felt vexed with her for asking it, and without even a blush on her smooth round cheek too; yet he was too chivalrous not to answer her comfortably.

"Oh, but you need not think anything of that," he said, smiling. "Men often say least when they care most; and even if Ernest is a bit flighty at times, he knows well enough how to appreciate the blessing of a pure-hearted girl's affection. I dare say my aunt has been a little irritating and incredulous; but these are things that mothers are always last to realise. Don't you believe me?" for she had grown paler, and there was a distressed look in her face. "Why, I have known a man—if it is any good to you to hear of him—who cared heart and soul for a girl very like yourself, and in much the same circumstances; and who, though he would have laid down his life gladly to have called her his wife even for one short week, never

opened his lips on the subject, or told his secret to her or anyone."

"Never?"

He had come to an abrupt stop, and Hetty's voice repeated the word like a startled echo. She was crimson enough now, and there was a new look in her beautiful eyes, turned from him in sudden shyness.

"Never. There were reasons against it in the beginning, and afterwards it would have been no good."

"But why? How?"

The vicar had stopped again, his voice hoarse with barely smothered pain, and he did not notice the tremble in the girl's voice, her nervously-clasped hands or heaving breast. There was even a touch of impatience in his manner as he answered her.

"Why? Because when he began to care for her she was such a child compared to him, such a mere child in reality, he would have thought it profanation to speak to her of such matters; and afterwards, as she began to grow up, it was to such beauty and sweetness that, knowing his own demerits, knowing too how little she had seen of the world, he hesitated equally between the risk of a "No" which might lose him the friendly confidence which had become the chief happiness of his life, or of a "Yes" which she might regret through the whole of hers. He told himself he would wait a little longer still, till she knew others and could choose more freely; and—while he was waiting another came, and the game was over. The second man went in and won in a week what he had worshipped for years, and there was an end of it."

"And was he content to let it be so? But, oh! you mean that he had no choice, that she married the other one before he could interfere?"

"I don't know if she married him or not. What does that matter so long as she loved him? And as my friend loved her, do you suppose he would want to interfere between her and the happiness she had chosen for herself?"

"Not unless he thought he could make her happier."

Hetty's voice was very low. The vicar's rang against it with deep impetuosity.

"That had nothing to do with it. It was for her to choose. She had known him the longest, and if she preferred the other he was too proud, for all his love, to haggle with her over her preference. Besides, it would have lost all its value for him if it could have been transferred from one man to another in that way. To sue for a touch of the cheek which had blushed under the kiss of another, to clasp a hand and gaze into eyes which had been pressed by other's fingers and smiled on other's vows might have been possible enough to some men. It wasn't so to him. The one love he cared for was that first, fresh, unsullied one which only a girl who has never played at love, or thought of lovers before, has it in her to give, the—— But there! what a fool I am to go on talking to you in this way—nearly as big a fool as he! Only I warn you, don't you think that because a man is silent he is not in earnest, and remember that I consider Pentreath has every reason to be so at present, and I congratulate him heartily on his wisdom and his luck in having such a rare chance of making use of it. Good-bye."

"He is not here to thank you, or I daresay he would," said Hetty; "but before you go let me warn you not to think that because people laugh and joke they must be in love. It is very kind of you to think Captain Pentreath lucky in having won me; but why you should assume that he has done so, and be as ready to make me over to him as his mother is to do the reverse, I don't know; and I am not obliged to you—not at all."

"Hetty, what do you mean? Is it not true then? Don't you care for Pentreath?"

"What right have you to ask such a question, Mr. Hamilton? And what do you mean by 'caring' for him? As a friend, someone to talk and sing with, to enliven his mother and me when we are a little dull? Yes, in that way, very much—as much as he cares for me."

"Hetty, it isn't in that way that Pentreath cares for you."

"Is it not? Then you know more than I do, or than he has told me, and I do not wish to hear anything more of it. I am quite sure of one thing—that I shall not do so from him. He is not so silly as you imagine him, Mr. Hamilton, and would as little dream of falling in love with me as of suspecting me of doing the same by him."

"But Hetty——"

"No, Mr. Hamilton, I don't want to hear or say any more. You and Mrs. Pentreath have joined to misunderstand and misjudge me, and I have been obliged in my own defence to tell you that you are wrong; but it is not pleasant to me to have to do so, and I did not think you would have required it. I thought you

knew—— But there, I won't think anything more about it, only please go away now and leave me. I don't want to be rude; but I am angry and hurt, and—and I would rather not see you any more—not now, at any rate. *Please go,*" and then, as he made no motion to do so, but rather came a step nearer, with hands outstretched as if to detain her, and a sudden light and flame in his face making its plainness almost beautiful, she fairly slipped past him and fled, flushed and panting, to hide herself in her own room.

At which time, perhaps, it may be well to pause and tell you something of her story.

CHAPTER II.

THE CAPTAIN'S LITTLE DAUGHTER.

ESTHER MAVORS was the daughter of an officer in the coastguard who, thirty years before, had loved and wooed a certain beautiful heiress, one Miss Isabel Bovilly. Lieutenant Mavors was handsome but poor. Miss Bovilly's relations would not hear of the match; and finally, after first encouraging and then playing with him, Miss Bovilly threw him off and married Mr. Pentreath, a wealthy banker, by whom she had one son—Ernest.

Lieutenant Mavors took his blighted hopes to sea, got into a reckless way of living, threw away more than one chance of promotion, and finally, ten years later, was knocked down by a fever on the West Coast of Africa, nursed back to health by an old Wesleyan missionary, and married, out of gratitude, to the latter's daughter, by whom he had one child, a girl—Hetty.

So much for genealogy. With the advent of the child, however, came the end of his married life. The young mother died in childbirth, and leaving the infant to be brought up by its maternal relatives, Captain Mavors went to sea again and remained there with brief intervals for another ten years, when the fortunate bestowal of a post in the coastguard service enabled him to settle down at home and begin life

afresh with his little daughter in a pleasant Devonshire watering place.

It was not a long life. He had meant it to be so. He had planned out all manner of new delights and new duties for it. Perhaps the duties seemed most delightful of all, both because they were new, and because of a sense of remorse that they should be so.

In truth he was rather a simple, one-ideaed man, whose life hitherto had been made up of but two things, a love and a profession. The love had come to nothing; and the profession had swallowed up everything else. As for his marriage that was but a twelve months' interlude; and though, being a tender-hearted man, the suddenness of its ending both shocked and grieved him, the grief was not of an utterly crushing nature, but rather suggested to him that as the sea had proved the best medicine for his first trouble, the sooner he had recourse to it for the second one the better. There was the child, of course; but as the missionary and his wife, broken-hearted at the loss of their only daughter, begged, almost with tears, that it might be left in their care, Captain Mavors thought himself more than justified in acceding to their prayer, and in almost forgetting the fact that he had a daughter, except when four times a year he religiously sent home a portion of his pay, more than sufficient to provide for her maintenance and education, and received in return a report of her continued existence and well being.

In this way he heard of the death of his wife's mother some four years later, and of the little Esther's removal to England to be brought up under the care

of an aunt, also a missionary's wife ; but who, having a large family of children, was then residing at Deal for the benefit of the younger one's health and education ; and once, on one of his rare visits home, he spent some weeks at the same place, where he not only made his first acquaintance with his little seven-year-old daughter, but was compelled with some chagrin to recognise the fact, that the relatives to whom he had so complacently resigned her were, though most pious and worthy people, nothing but very ordinary members of the great lower-middle-class section of society ; and that if his daughter were allowed to grow up among them she would, by the time she was a woman, be quite unfitted to take her place among the class to which by right of her father's blood, she undoubtedly belonged.

It was an embarrassing discovery for the honest sailor, and all the more so that he felt it ought not to have been one at all ; yet what to do under it he didn't know. His own relations were out of the question. Years ago they had offended him by strictures on what they called his "low marriage ;" and he, to use his own expression had "thrown them overboard" in return. To send Esther, or Hetty, as she was generally called, to them therefore was impossible. Yet what else to do without hurting the feelings of the good people who had shown her all the kindness she had ever received he could not imagine.

In the end he did nothing at all, but went to sea again, bidding Hetty "make haste and grow up so as to be his little housekeeper," but even this slight intercourse had aroused the instinct of fatherhood within him ; and from that day he found himself

looking forward quite eagerly to the childish, ill-spelt epistles which now came pretty regularly to him, and never without some mention of "how *big*" Hetty was growing, and of how she had learnt to fill "Uncle Matt's" pipe or darn a sock by way of preparing for her duties in the future, innocent reminders of how his half-joking recommendation had been caught up and treasured by the child's heart.

She was only ten years old when he next came home, yet he hardly knew her again. The shy, chubby-legged child, with forefinger in her mouth and the other hand curled receptively for "sweeties," had turned into a lovely, slender little girl, older than her years by reason of having grown up with cousins so much her seniors; but with much of his own simplicity of character, and a native grace and refinement which charmed him the more for its contrast to her other surroundings; a girl, too, with eyes the mirrors of his own, and shining hair, whose way of curling reminded him—by the crooked, pathetic fidelity characteristic of the man—not of her mother's locks, but of those which had once waved round the lost and early love.

It was just then that the coast-guard situation became vacant, and he accepted it with effusion, eager as a child for an excuse to carry off his new-found treasure to a place where it would be all his own, and he alone would have the keeping of it. Besides the sea had no longer the charm for him which it once possessed. He had not been young when he married. He was past middle age now, and of late his health had given way with ominous rapidity. It was time to

retire from the more active part of his profession, and devote himself to those home duties and pleasures which he had already too long neglected.

Yet even amid these pleasures there was sometimes a savour of pain. Love has its tyrannies and its remorse; and the more Captain Mavors loved this dainty woman-child whom Heaven had sent him to brighten his declining years, the more keenly he realised how incapable his rough sailor-life had made him of understanding the delicate intricacies of feminine needs and natures, and dreaded lest after all he should not be able either in care or education to do as well for her as her homely, hard-voiced aunt and cousins had done in the past.

He was afraid, too, of her missing them. At first, childlike, she talked of them incessantly and he suffered acute pangs of jealousy therefrom; then, when she found this out and ceased to speak of them he thought she was pining in secret and devoted himself more than ever to her. In fact he spoilt her egregiously, and, but that she was naturally a very sweet, simple-natured, loving child, with a happy fund of gaiety of her own, would have done so more completely still, seeing that he did not even know when she was naughty. Her mother, poor soul, had never been anything but good, and his only other intimate acquaintance and secret ideal of womanhood, Mrs. Isabel Pentreath, *née* Bovilly, had been a spoilt child herself, and a sufficiently capricious and petulant one to make little Hetty seem a very angel of submission by comparison.

Hetty knew all about that hard-hearted lady, and

how for love of her, and bitterness at her cruelty, her father had thrown up home and friends and England for ten long weary years. The unknown woman became indeed a sort of queen in her imagination, and she used to look at her picture still hanging in the captain's room, and copy the pose of her head, little thinking she would ever see her.

Yet that very event came to pass while the girl was still in her sixteenth year.

Mrs. Pentreath, then a wealthy widow, came to spend a summer at the little Devonshire watering-place. The old lovers met: the acquaintance between them was revived, and all the short-lived pride and resentment on the man's part faded away at the first sight of the still handsome woman, who years ago had taught him what passion meant, only to scatter it to waste by her caprice and inconstancy.

Mrs. Pentreath too was touched and softened. It is something to a woman of fifty to find that in one man's eyes she is still as beautiful as at twenty-five. She was all alone too. Her son had just been gazetted to an Indian regiment.

What might have come of the meeting had Captain Mavors lived, Heaven knows! but death interposed, and within three weeks of the meeting with his old love the sailor closed his eyes on the world and her, his dying hand groping to the last for the touch of her fingers, and his dying heart cheered by her promise to be a guardian and protector to the orphan child he was leaving behind him.

"It breaks my heart to think of her," he had said at the last. "There'll be no one to take care of her when

I am gone, and she's too young and pretty to take care of herself."

And Mrs. Pentreath answered with genuine warmth and tenderness:

"She is not too young to take care of me. Be easy about her, John. Your child shall never want a friend while I am alive, and when she loses you she shall come to me and make my home hers."

It was a generous offer and the lady kept it generously. True, on reflection—reflection aided by a wise recognition of the girl's dawning beauty and the remembrance of a too susceptible soldier-son—she decided to call Hetty from the first her "little companion," and to give her regular duties in that capacity, thus preventing her or others from considering her position in the ambiguous light of adopted daughterhood. But this matter settled she allowed her natural benevolence full play, and treated the girl with so much kindness and affection that Hetty, having no remembrance of her own mother, was quite ready to transfer to her protectress the devotion due to one. Her pretty little fingers were never weary of mending or making, or her pretty little feet of running errands in Mrs. Pentreath's service. She nursed her when sick, read to her and amused her when well, and made the house bright at all times by the mere fact of her sunshiny presence.

Mrs. Pentreath often said she did not know what she should do without the child, and in truth Hetty had no wish that she should try. Her life at Guelder Lodge was perfectly happy. She was kindly treated, and well cared for, shared in all the comforts and

luxuries of her guardian's life, had masters to teach her French, German, and Italian, and by-and-by another one in addition.

This master was Mrs. Pentreath's nephew, and his name was George Hamilton.

"George," said Mrs. Pentreath one day, when Hetty had been living with her for nearly a year, "do you know that little girl is frightfully ignorant?"

The young vicar looked surprised.

"What girl? Not Esther—or Hetty, is it you call her—Mavors? She always seems to me so wonderfully intelligent; and her music——"

"I am not talking about her music. I give her masters for accomplishments, and I must say she takes in what they teach her as readily as a cat does cream; but it's her general education. She knows nothing and has read nothing; can play a sonata by Beethoven, and has never heard of Beethoven in her life, and can't read aloud the simplest book to me without asking a hundred questions about allusions and circumstances which every girl of sixteen ought to know by heart. Her poor father seems to have neglected her education shamefully; and at my age I am too old to be turned into a dictionary of reference. Don't you think you could help her a little—show her what books she ought to read, and make her read them? It would be a real charity both to the child and myself and she is so intelligent that I believe you would find it pleasant."

"I dare say I should—At any rate, I'll do it willingly," said Mr. Hamilton, and as the copy-books inform us that "Good deeds find their own reward," it may be frankly told that he had not assumed his post of

teacher many weeks before he did find it very pleasant, so pleasant indeed that before long those three hours in the week which he devoted to cramming Esther's young head with German and English literature, poetry, and philosophy, became the brightest of all the hundred and sixty-eight to him, and shed a rosy light over all the intervening ones.

It was the old story—the story of man and woman brought together as master and pupil, the man coming to teach and learning instead to love, the old story which we have all heard from our cradles; and if Mr. Hamilton managed to keep the secret of it to himself it was simply and solely for the reasons indicated in the story of his “friend.” To him Hetty's youth and innocence was a shield stronger than any disapproval of parent or guardian, and he would have felt it a desecration of them to let in the hot breath of love or passion upon their virgin freshness.

In this way the girl grew up happy and unconscious as a daisy, breathing an atmosphere of love as the flower breathes the sunshine, without analysing it, learning to stand by sick beds at her master's side, working in his parish, teaching in his schools, and revenging herself for her submission in these lines by a certain sweet tyranny over the vicar which was extremely pleasant and natural to both tyrant and victim; though the former at any rate would have felt highly indignant had she seen it wielded by any other woman.

And Mrs. Pentreath looked on, and being a woman of the world, saw more of Mr. Hamilton's secret than he at all guessed, and said nothing. In truth, what she saw did not displease her. George Hamilton was

an excellent fellow, a scholar, and a gentleman; but he was her husband's nephew, and the Pentreaths, of course, did not belong to the same exalted sphere as the Bovillys. He might, perhaps, be allowed to do what would be impossible to Ernest, for instance; and though even so considered it would be a very good match for the child, Hetty was a good little thing, and Mrs. Pentreath would not grudge it to her. Besides, it would not take her far away, which was a consideration.

"I really couldn't do without her now, till Ernest brings me home a real daughter. Ah, if only that dear boy would settle down well!" the mother said to herself, sighing heavily as she re-read for the third time a letter which she had just received from India.

This was in June, and in the said letter there was no mention of any prospect that she would see her son shortly. Indeed, she knew that his regiment had still to get through nearly a year's service before it returned home; and therefore she might dismiss thoughts of his settling down for a time, and give her mind instead to the pretty home idyll which she believed to be gliding swiftly to its completion under her nose.

"I shouldn't wonder if I were buying the child's *trousseau* by Christmas. Poor Jack! he ought to be obliged to me," the lady said to herself, benignly.

Alas! long before Christmas, before, indeed, the August sun had finished reddening the sheaves of golden wheat, while the great white petals of the magnolia were opening day by day, and languid Londoners lay gasping for breath under the shade of the trees in Kew Gardens, a certain P. and O. steamer

dropped quietly into dock in Southampton harbour, and one hour later a telegram was in Mrs. Pentreath's hands, which upset in an instant all her thoughts of Hetty and the vicar, and replaced them by matter much more important.

For on board of that P. and O. steamer was Capt. Pentreath. India is an idle place, and idleness is fruitful of flirtations, and folly of all sorts. Whether the young man's indiscretions had gone beyond folly this time was not known, and need not be asked. All that Mrs. Pentreath learnt was that he had contrived to get his name so mixed up with that of his colonel's wife, that, to prevent worse consequences, he had been urgently recommended to apply for leave, and exchange into a home-going regiment; and as for once in his life he had prudence enough to comply with this counsel, such strong interest was brought to bear on carrying it into effect, that in less than three weeks he had looked his last on Rumchandreepore and the too fascinating bungalow where he had wasted so many perilous hours, and was steaming slowly out of the Hooghly, *en route* for England.

CHAPTER III.

AT ODDS—CHECK!

IT was a sad blow to Mrs. Pentreath, and she felt it sorely. To the young man, however, and to a certain set among his friends it seemed rather a feather in his cap than otherwise. True, he had come home under a cloud so far as his own regiment and his chances of promotion were concerned; but a cloud with such a romantic lining as the unfortunate passion of a married lady of rank for a young unmarried officer had no glamour of disgrace about it; and when to this were added the culprit's exceeding good looks and chivalrous withdrawal from the field of temptation, the whole affair wore quite an heroic aspect in some eyes; and made even little Hetty Mavors gaze with timid wonder and admiration at the too dangerous Adonis.

Of course she knew nothing of the real facts of the story, nor was likely to do so; neither the vicar nor Mrs. Pentreath thinking such matters fit subject for a young girl's ears; while Ernest himself had grace enough not to allude to his "conquest" at home, though he lacked magnanimity to deny it when laughingly called to account by his club friends on the subject.

The pretty idyll at the Lodge, however, came to an end all the same. Captain Pentreath was not the man

to play second fiddle anywhere, least of all in his own home; and, considering that he had found that residence rather dull on previous occasions, he thought it a wise proceeding of his mother to have secured such a pretty little girl as Hetty Mavors for his delectation at present. He approved of her greatly indeed, and told his cousin George so with a frankness which the latter found the reverse of flattering. She was so fresh, he said, so piquante, so full of fun, and yet so ridiculously innocent. It was worth something to make her open those big bewitching brown eyes of hers with the look of a pretty surprised baby; and then, what a delicious laugh she had! He raved about her in fact, all the more, perhaps, for the coldness with which the vicar listened to his raptures, and proved he was in earnest in them by appropriating the girl to his own service from the very day of his return with the careless ease of a young Bashaw.

It was quite a matter of course. There was nothing special in it. Everyone waited on him at Guelder Lodge; everyone ran after him; everything was put aside for him. Hetty was one of the household; it seemed quite natural that she should play his accompaniments, sing to him, mend his gloves, drive him to and from the station in his mother's pony-carriage, and fetch and carry for him generally; and, in return, he was very good to her, lounged beside her at the piano and in the garden, brought her bonbons and novels, taught her to ride; and even contrived that she should be included in sundry invitations to evening and garden parties given by his mother's

grand friends, in honour of his return, and which seemed to Hetty a very paradise of dissipation.

It was not much use for the vicar to come to the Lodge now. Mrs. Pentreath, who was always wanting him at other times, wanted no one now she had got her son; and as that young man was always in Hetty's neighbourhood, it was impossible to see one without the other.

In the vicar's eyes the pair seemed inseparable, and the girl as pleased with her new friend as he with her; so it came to pass that his visits to the Lodge grew rare and more rare, and his words, when there, so few and cold, that Hetty herself noticed the change, and felt hurt and mortified by it, wondering vaguely if he thought it "beneath him" to take as much notice of her before his cousin as he had done before.

A coldness and formality sprang up between them, and so, just when the girl most needed a true friend, she was left instead to the guidance of her own ignorance and inexperience to steer her course between the shoals of Captain Pentreath's attentions and the rocks of his mother's anger. To-day she had been tossed roughly from one to the other, and so cruelly buffeted in the second encounter, that her tender feelings were all bruised and quivering from the shock. It was a new thing to her to be spoken harshly to at all, and by Mrs. Pentreath, too, who was usually so kind and indulgent to her; but though this was grievous enough, and though it was still more grievous and dreadful that the cause of such speaking should be a man, and that man Mrs. Pentreath's son—even these causes of trouble would not have shamed and agitated her so much as

the way in which Mr. Hamilton, her own friend and master, had been brought into the discussion.

True, he had not joined in his aunt's condemnation of her. Mrs. Pentreath had accused him of doing so, but he had denied the fact—denied it with indignation; and even in the storm of feeling which sent the girl flying to her room to sob her heart out in peace and solitude, she never dreamt of doubting his word; but in giving it he had shown, and shown quite openly, a readiness to look on her as the property of another person, and to make her over to that person, which hurt her in a way she hardly understood, and would have gone further to crush her bright nature than anything else if it had not been for one or two items which came back to her now in her solitude—the look in his face, for instance, when she burst into tears; those words, “I would cut off my right hand rather than hurt you by a pin-prick;” and, more than all, the story of—his “friend.”

His “*friend*,” indeed! Had not eye, and lip, and tone all told her that it was himself, that he was the lover and she the girl spoken of? And if that were so what mattered any one's unkindness, any one's folly? What mattered any other ill the world could send her; and why—why had she been such a little fool as to lose her head and her temper, and drive him away as she had done? Why had she run away herself, instead of waiting to hear what else he had to say? Might not the story have had a fresh chapter added to it if she had been more sensible?

The afternoon sunshine was falling in long golden stripes through Hetty's window, turning to transparent

flame the few fluttering crimson leaves which still dangled from the brown tangle of Virginia-creeper without, and touching with a fiery finger the mass of ivy which garlanded the narrow casement, and the girl's brown head, bent down upon the sill. By-and-by she lifted it, and looked about her. She was tired of thinking and fretting, and, besides, her cheeks burned, and her eyes were swollen. Fresh air and exercise would take away these outward signs of her trouble at all events, and give her back the composure she needed before she again met Mrs. Pentreath and her son at dinner. There was plenty of time for a good long walk before that, and the thought was no sooner in her mind than she hastened to carry it into execution ; so only waiting to don hat and ulster, and tell the old butler that she was gone for a walk, she left the house and took her way as rapidly as possible in the direction of the river, the quietest route at this time of the year that she could think of.

It was rather a muddy route to-day. There had been a great deal of rain lately, and the river was swollen so as even to overflow the towing-path in parts, and oblige her to take a wide circuit over soil soft enough to encase her stout little boots in a thick coating of mud, or to take flying leaps from stone to stone before she could resume her onward way. But Hetty was not the sort of girl to mind either a long jump or a little mud ; and for the rest the sky was blue and bright, the air just sharp enough to be exhilarating, and the sun shone so gaily on shore and stream, on the yellow leaves of the willow and the copper-coloured leaves of the beech, on gnarled trunk and shallow,

silvery pool, on the red roofs of dingy old Brentford on the opposite bank of the river, and the brown sail splashed with orange of a big clumsy barge drifting slowly citywards, that by-and-by the girl's spirit began to brighten too, her step grew brisker, her head more erect. Once or twice she stopped to drink in a mouthful of the fresh cool breeze, or pick a few bright-coloured leaves from the withered hedgerow, or lift a sadly bloated frog out of the roadway, and deposit him on a stone for safety. She was rising from the last-named task when her ear was caught by the rapid trample of a horse's feet in her rear, and stepping quickly on one side to avoid being run over, she heard herself greeted in tones too familiar to her to be pleasant at the present moment.

"I thought so!" cried the rider as he checked his horse at the girl's side, and looked down with a gay smile into her blushing face. "I thought I couldn't be mistaken in a certain little figure, even when seen from a distance, which would have made most other figures indistinguishable, so—— But Miss Mavors—Hetty! what is the matter?"

For Hetty was not only blushing, but there was a look of annoyance and distress in her face, which in conjunction with the traces of tears still visible about her eyes, might well provoke comment, more especially as there was nothing in any way distressing or alarming about the other face bent over her. It was a bright and handsome one, belonging to a young man of under thirty, fair, rather pale, and adorned with a long brown moustache, which, together with his trim soldierly figure, made him sufficiently taking in appearance to

win a pleasant glance from any girl not very hard to please. Hetty, however, was vexed with herself at her own embarrassment, and answered a little pettishly:

“Nothing is the matter, Captain Pentreath. I was only startled by finding your horse so close behind me, and—and I never expected to see you here.”

“No? Well, I did expect to see you,” said the young officer, gaily, as he dismounted and, throwing the reins over his arm, walked at her side. “I came home half an hour ago, found the house ‘empty, swept, and garnished,’ heard that madam was out driving and miss walking—‘riverways’ old Hickson said—and so rode off riverways myself in search of the latter. You see, therefore, mademoiselle, that if you were meditating running away, an idea which your present guilty air suggests to me, you may as well abandon the attempt, and resign yourself to being brought home again in honourable captivity.

Captain Pentreath spoke in a jesting tone, looking laughingly in the girl’s eyes, as if expecting to see them laugh back in answer. It was not an unnatural thought. So late as yesterday, indeed, they might, and probably would, have done so, Hetty’s eyes having a trick of laughing out at small notice; while she had got too used to Captain Pentreath making her the chief object of his attentions when at home to be either startled or flattered by them. Since this morning, however, everything had become different to her. She had tasted of the tree of knowledge, and bitter as the flavour of it might be to her, she could no longer feel or act as she had done in the happy days of her ignorance. Those two thoughts, so impossible in our

guileless childhood, so common in after life, "What does it mean, and what will other people think it means?" had been forced upon her mind; and being too naïve and inexperienced to conceal what was passing in it, she betrayed one of them by the question with which she answered Captain Pentreath's speech.

"But why did you come after me? Did you tell Hickson you would? I hope not—at least, I mean I——"

Captain Pentreath laughed again.

"I did not," he said. "I asked him in what direction the *mater* had gone. He said he thought it was to see Lady Carisfort. 'Ah then,' said I, 'if I ride on in the same direction, I shall most likely fall in with her,' and I departed. Do not look so glumly at me, Miss Mavors, for I told no fibs. If I had ridden along that road it is very probable that I should have met my lady-mother. The only obstacle was that I didn't. I came after you instead."

"Then I wish you hadn't," said Hetty with more promptness than grammar, and with a look which said she meant it.

Captain Pentreath opened his eyes.

"That is rude," he said, "so I don't believe you. I think on the contrary that you are very properly grateful to your guardian's son, *ergo*, her representative, *ergo*, your guardian also, for taking the trouble to throw the much needed shield of his protection over a very imprudent young woman. You know you ought not to be wandering so far from home by yourself, Hetty."

"Indeed, Captain Pentreath, I do not. I am not a fine young lady with footmen to walk after me, and I

have been used to going out alone ever since I was ten years old. I like it," said Hetty, curtly, but with a lip which quivered nevertheless.

Was not his plea of guardianship the very one on which she had acted in the past, and thought so natural? Yet to-day she could not help fancying that he put it forward rather in jest than earnest, and with a mocking look in his blue eyes, which made her wonder if there had not been some ground for Mrs. Pentreath's anger after all; and whether the matter-of-course simplicity with which she had accepted the young officer's flatteries and attentions, and entered into the spirit of easy familiarity which he had established between them from the beginning, had not something in it to-day perilously like flirtation.

Captain Pentreath shook his head at her with affected solemnity.

"Then I am sorry to hear it," he said, "for it is an immoral liking and ought to be checked. You are not ten years old now, observe, and you are at least ten years prettier than you must have been at that tender age, therefore—— But, Hetty, you are looking quite grave! What's the matter? Have I offended you?"

"Only by talking nonsense, Captain Pentreath, and by calling me by my christian name. I heard your mother tell you once that it was not usual, and—and you know you have no right to do so."

"I have as good a right as my parson-cousin, at any rate; and I noticed the day after my arrival that he called you by your christian name, for I thought what a dear little one it was, and how well it suited the owner."

Hetty's face became very pink, but whether at the first part of his sentence or the second, Pentreath could not determine. She only answered the former.

"Mr. Hamilton has known me since I was quite a little girl, and taught me nearly everything I know. That is quite a different case."

"By Jove! so it seems, and I envy him accordingly. I wish *I* could teach you anything, or that you would teach me if that would do as well. Will you? I'll be a very docile pupil."

"I doubt it, Captain Pentreath—at any rate I'd rather not try."

"And I wish you would. Do try me, Hetty. You couldn't give me any greater pleasure than telling me to do something for you. Don't you know it?" And Captain Pentreath drew a little nearer to the girl's side, bending his handsome head till the fair moustache almost brushed the dark curls against her temples.

Someone coming along at the other side of the leafless quick-set hedge which bordered the towing-path saw the couple at the moment, and stopped short, as if startled; but Hetty had turned her pretty glowing face with sudden animation to her companion, and unconscious of a witness, said quite eagerly; and so that he heard each word,

"Do you *really* mean that? If you did it would make me very happy."

"I mean everything I say to you. Try me, that is all," said Captain Pentreath, fervently.

Hetty looked up, a saucy smile in her eyes meeting the admiring one bent on her.

"Then will you please get on your horse again and ride on in the direction in which you were going. I told you I came out by myself because I wanted to be alone, and I would rather go back so. I would indeed."

It was not the reply Captain Pentreath had expected, and he looked visibly annoyed, as he exclaimed :

"Why, Hetty, what's up? Have I done anything to vex you?" Then remembering the smile in her eyes: "Ah, but I see you don't mean it. You are only teasing me, you provoking little witch, as if you didn't know that no man in his senses would go in one direction when you are going in another."

"But I know nothing of the sort, and I want one man to do it. Captain Pentreath, I am not joking, indeed. I do mean it."

"Then, Hetty, I must have offended you. What have I done?"

"Nothing at all. You have not offended me."

"Then why want to drive me from you just because we chance to be taking our exercise along the same road as we have done a score of times before?"

Hetty's face was crimson. *Had* they been out together so often? She had not thought of it at the time, but now she had a vague remembrance of something cold and displeased in Mrs. Pentreath's manner when she came in rather late one day from a walk accompanied by Captain Pentreath. She answered briskly enough, however :

"Do you call it chance when, as you told me just now, you came this way on purpose to find me?"

"And to bring you home ! It is getting late, Hetty, for you to be out."

"I know it, and I am going home now ; but please let me go alone. Please don't come with me. Indeed I have a reason for asking you."

That the girl was in earnest now the most sceptical person could not have doubted. Her pretty face was quite pale again, and her eyes wore a beseeching expression which no generous man could have resisted.

Captain Pentreath, however, was not famed for generosity where women were concerned. He kept at her side as she turned, and only asked :

"What when is the reason, Hetty ? Don't be silly and mysterious. Tell me."

"I cannot, Captain Pentreath. Please do as I ask you."

"What, when you won't do anything I ask ! That isn't fair. But I see what it is quite well, Hetty—my mother has been talking some confounded rubbish to you."

"You ought not to speak of your mother in that way, Captain Pentreath."

"Well, but isn't it true ? Hasn't she ?"

"I will not tell you. I don't want to speak of your mother at all. Do you forget that I am her companion, and owe all I have to her kindness and generosity ?"

"No, by Heavens ! nor that she owes all the pleasantness her house has to your company. Egad, she wouldn't keep me long here without it. Don't *you* know that ?"

Hetty made no answer.

"Because you may as well do so. It is the truth,

and so if she is going to bully you and make you disagreeable to me——”

“I don’t want to be disagreeable to you, Captain Pentreath. I only—only——” but Hetty’s lip was quivering. She began to realise how helpless she was, and her eyes filled with tears. Even Captain Pentreath was touched by the sight of her genuine distress.

“You only want to drive me from you,” he said, pathetically. “Well, Hetty, you know your power; and however it pains me to obey you I will not pain you by the contrary. You must make it up to me some other time, and I can promise you one thing—if the *mater* is at the bottom of this, she sha’n’t congratulate herself on the result of it.”

And then he did mount his horse and ride away, while Hetty pursued her homeward route with quickened steps. She had nearly reached the Lodge gates when she saw another gentleman, a familiar figure in a low felt hat and Roman collar, coming up the dusky road under the horse-chestnut trees as if to meet her. It was George Hamilton, and involuntarily her steps quickened, and she put out one little hand as if to greet him sooner. To her great surprise, however, he did not stop or speak, but looking at her full with a kind of hard, unsmiling severity, lifted his hat, and turning abruptly away crossed the road to the opposite side.

CHAPTER IV.

A DOUBLE MISUNDERSTANDING.

THERE are *mauvais quarts d'heures* in all lives and it was a specially *mauvais quart d'heure* which began for Hetty Mavors about this time. In the first place, the vicar ceased to come to the house at all, so that she had no explanation either of his words in the drawing-room that day, or of his strangely altered demeanour so shortly afterwards. In the next, the breach between her and Mrs. Pentreath would not heal. It should have done so, seeing that Hetty was even nervously anxious to keep within the limits assigned to her once she was aware of them; and that Mrs. Pentreath having said her say, and being conscious that she had said it over harshly, was well disposed to let the matter drop, and trust to the good principles of her young companion for there being no necessity for its renewal. But unless one is very great, or very humble, it is difficult to go back from a position one has once assumed. Mrs. Pentreath was too proud to weaken the force of her rebuke by owning it had been too severe; and Hetty had been too much wounded by her patroness's injustice to make any advances on her own part. So a certain constraint and coldness sprang up between these two ladies who had been so fond of one another; and the younger suffered most from it,

seeing that the other had her son to fall back upon, while she had—nobody!

Certainly no one could accuse Hetty of seeking consolation from Captain Pentreath, or of “running after” that young officer any more. On the contrary, she avoided him as much as possible, left off chattering to him or volunteering any of those little friendly offices and errands which she had taken on herself in all innocence in his service, kept as much as possible at her guardian’s side when he was present and even substituted a huge and interminable piece of embroidery in place of the songs and duets with which she and the young officer had been wont to make the evenings tuneful. She only went to the piano now when his mother asked her; never otherwise.

It was excellently meant, but it was overdone, as such efforts are apt to be, and not from any wilfulness on Hetty’s part, but simply from girlish simplicity and ignorance. Mrs. Pentreath, of course, could have done it much better in her young days, and could have retired from a flirtation with as much grace as she entered on it; but then Mrs. Pentreath had been a little woman of the world from her very cradle, and forgetting that Hetty was the very reverse, she felt almost angry with the girl at times for her awkwardness and consciousness; and even wondered whether this exaggerated coldness and distance was but a blind to conceal a more clandestine intimacy between the young people than had previously existed.

In truth, however, poor Hetty had a very difficult part to play, and the person who was the cause of her having to play it was the very one to make it more

difficult still to her. From a sense of delicacy for which Mrs. Pentreath did not give her credit, she had sturdily refused to give the young officer any explanation of her change of conduct ; but Captain Pentreath was not to be blinded. Even if his mother had not given him more than one hint that his attentions to her young companion were displeasing to her, his own vanity would have forbidden him to believe that any girl could voluntarily withdraw herself from them ; and, therefore, while preserving a certain amount of caution before " the old lady," he chose to assume that Hetty and he were fellow-victims to her tyranny, and to embarrass the girl unspeakably by a system of sighs and glances, whispered words, and covert expressions of sympathy, which, if not actual love-making, were sufficiently like it to make the poor child desperately uncomfortable.

If she had only known how to rebuff him, and in such a manner that she might not seem to attach more meaning to his conduct than he intended to express by it ! But, alas ! it was just this that seemed impossible to her. These things, which appear so easy to us in after-life, are often very Juggernauts in the path of youth ; and of all difficult things to refuse a man before he has offered to her is the most difficult to a young and modest girl ; more especially when, as in this case, the man has no intention of offering himself ; and in the desire to enjoy, what is to him a very pretty flirtation with a very pretty girl, keeps carefully on the safe side of any expression of which she could take hold.

Hetty could have cried at times for a friend to confide in and ask assistance from in her difficulties ; but

Mrs. Pentreath, who might have been such a one in the past, was of course the last person to whom she could appeal at present, and as for that other, he never came near her now. Since the day of that passionate interview in the parlour when he had said so much and yet so little, she had not once spoken to him ; and the poor child grew pale and wistful-looking in the loneliness to which this falling away of her old allies seemed to have finally condemned her.

Captain Pentreath, too, was beginning to get tired of her persistent shyness and avoidance, and took advantage of her wan looks to introduce a little plan of his own for breaking them down.

There was, as I think I have said, an eight o'clock service at St. Gudule's on weekdays. Hetty had been in the habit of attending in all weathers, her little feet tripping to church as briskly through the winter snow as over the summer grass ; and Mrs. Pentreath approved of the practice. She thought it well for young girls to be religious in their habits, and said so. But one day it came to her knowledge that Ernest had begun to accompany Miss Mavors on these early excursions, and forthwith the girl found her church-going at an end. She had no idea of the real reason of the prohibition, or that it had, in fact, been the means of first opening Mrs. Pentreath's eyes to the idea that her son might be finding the girl more attractive than was desirable. The elder lady never said so ; she had far too much tact and breeding to suggest such an idea ; but it was put to Hetty that when there was a third person in the house it would be a convenience to her patroness to have her at home in the morning ; and the

girl complied immediately and as a matter of course. Equally as a matter of course Captain Pentreath discontinued his church-going when she did, thus confirming his mother in her suspicions ; and there the matter rested, greatly to Hetty's regret, and not a little to that of the vicar, who missed her sweet face from its accustomed corner in the church, and guessed quite wrongly as to the reason why.

But one day Hetty found the embargo taken off as quietly as it had been put on, and by means of the very person who had been the occasion of it. Captain Pentreath had been grumbling at breakfast at being awakened in the morning by the eight o'clock bell from St. Gudule's.

What did Hamilton mean, he asked impatiently, by ringing a beastly bell at that hour in November, when no one in their senses would dream of getting up to wade through fog and mud to a dreary service ? For his part, as there wasn't enough sun in England to warm the air in winter, he required to stay in bed till the fires had had time to do it instead ; and if Hamilton could find anyone idiotic enough to prefer going to his ghastly old church instead, his victims oughtn't to want a bell to call them to the torture.

"Fie, Ernest, for shame ! I believe George has a very fair congregation, and I am sure the bell never disturbs me," said Mrs. Pentreath in the indulgent way in which she always rebuked her son ; but about an hour later, when Hetty and she were alone, she said to the girl :

"I don't think you are as rosy as you used to be, Hetty. You used to have such a good colour every

day last winter when you came in to breakfast from the early service. I'm afraid it's too cold for you to go at present; but if not, and if you like it, I have nothing particular for you to do, you know, my dear, which need keep you at home."

Hetty's face went rosy enough on the instant to satisfy anyone.

"Too cold!" she repeated, almost indignantly; "it was never too cold for her to go, and there was nothing she liked better."

Her eyes quite shone with gladness at the thought of the permitted pleasure, and she thanked Mrs. Pentreath so eagerly that the elder lady almost began to question the wisdom of her "largesse" and to wonder if she had unwittingly played into the hands of two young people who cared so much for each other's society as to stoop to scheme for it.

Perhaps as regarded one of them she was not very far out.

Captain Pentreath had no opportunity of seeing Hetty alone during that day; but when he came down dressed for dinner in the evening he found her in the drawing-room before him. She was standing on the rug before the fireplace, stretching out her hands to the blaze to warm them. No one else was there. Even the gas was not yet turned up; and as the firelight leaping up cast a warm glow over the soft, semi-transparent folds of her simple frock of Madras muslin, touched to a deeper crimson the knots of ruby-coloured ribbon at her breast and elbows, and flushing her sweet face with rosy warmth, fell back, leaving a brighter sparkle in the bright dark eyes which turned enquir-

ingly to the door, Ernest thought he had never seen her look so young, and fair, and winsome. His own eyes kindled with genuine admiration, and as he came towards her he exclaimed :

“What a radiant vision for a weary man’s eyes ! I only wish it were Christmas, and that there was mistletoe about ! But it is cruel of you to look so blooming to-night, Hetty, when only yesterday I was impressing on my mother how awfully ill every one thought you were looking. Has she said anything to you about it, and about your taking more exercise ? I went as far as to suggest that was what you wanted.”

“I, *ill* ! No. What do you mean ? Mrs. Pentreath said nothing to me,” answered Hetty, blushing rather from embarrassment than pleasure at his compliments ; “except,” she added immediately, “that she said I might go to the early service again ; but——”

Captain Pentreath burst out laughing.

“She did ! Bravo, mother ! I didn’t think you would swallow my matutinal hook so easily, or that I had baited it with the right worm for you. To think then that she did stop your going just because she found out I was accompanying you ! I wonder who told her.”

“Captain Pentreath, she never did ! What makes you fancy such a thing ?” cried Hetty, shocked and crimsoning ; but she was silenced.

“What ? Why the fact that I am not a fool. You heard what I said this morning about my weakness for late rising in winter. What do *you* think when you see the way on which she acts on it and before the day is out ? I saw through it from the first ; but it

wasn't worth while saying anything while we could get our walks at other times. What happy ones we have had, Hetty! but now pray, pray——”

What Captain Pentreath was praying for, however, remained unknown; for at that moment the door opened, and before Hetty, in her confusion and indignation, could even open her lips to remonstrate, they were sealed by the appearance of Mrs. Pentreath, who entered the room ruffling the train of her long black silk dress behind her; and taking in with a calmly critical glance, which embraced and measured both together, the startled attitude of the girl with her hot flushed face and sparkling eyes, and Captain Pentreath's elaborate absorption in the newspaper, behind which he was almost hidden as he reclined in the arm-chair into which he had hastily flung himself.

Not one word of comment did she utter; but there was something in that keen, momentary glance and in the set of her lips and eyebrows which spoke more eloquently than a lengthy speech to Hetty's aroused sensitiveness, and in one second confirmed the truth of Captain Pentreath's revelation as to the cause of the abrogation and re-granting of her liberty.

The girl's whole soul was in a tumult of disgust, wounded feeling, and impatience. There is always something intensely galling to a frank high-spirited nature to find that it has been mistrusted and suspected at a time when it is conscious of nothing but the truest and most innocent intentions; and the idea that Mrs. Pentreath had been silently disapproving of and guarding against her so far back as those summer months when she (Hetty) thought that there

was nothing but love and confidence between them stung and mortified her to a degree which almost made her forget her previous annoyance at Captain Pentreath's sympathetic confidences, though, from the clandestine way in which they were bestowed on her, she was beginning to feel them both disagreeable and compromising.

But by morning time all these shadows had happily disappeared. In middle age, indeed, we take our cares to bed with us, turn them over with our pillows, and wake from restless slumbers to find them couched at our side and looking bigger and more ghastly in the morning light; but youth has a blessed facility for letting things unpleasant slip lightly by, and burying the day's troubles in the night's sleep; and when Hetty woke next morning it was to nothing but a sense of pleasure in resuming the habit which had begun by being a duty, and had become one of the chief sources of happiness in the day.

To be sure, one little twinge of conscience did trouble her, suggested by the query as to whether it was only the quiet morning service which seemed so attractive to her; or whether, in looking forward to it, she was not also craving for a sight of the friend whose counsels in and out of his sacred office she had so sorely missed; but even if Hetty had been more of the modern introspective character than she was, she could hardly have regarded this little weakness as a deadly sin. Of course, regarded impartially, the Rev. George Hamilion was only a man like his cousin Ernest Pentreath; but women have a way of their own for discriminating on these things, and to Hetty

he was quite unlike any other man, Captain Pentreath least of all. Besides, it was only in his ministerial character that she was looking forward to seeing him. It was not likely that he would even notice her presence in the church, so little had he seemed to miss it.

So Hetty thought, and yet, just as she was leaving church after the brief service, and hesitating a second before facing a small cold rain which had begun to speckle the grey stones, and add a raw dampness to the chill of the November air, a voice behind her said :

"Have you no umbrella? Surely you didn't come out without one in this weather?"

Hetty turned round, her whole face one flush of shy, startled joy which a man must have been blind indeed not to read and feel flattered by; yet her answer was tame and commonplace enough :

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Hamilton, I forgot it; but it doesn't matter. I don't mind a little rain."

"You may learn to do so if you go out in it unnecessarily, and before breakfast too. Nothing is so foolish."

But though the vicar tried to speak coldly, it was a difficult task with that lovely, wistful face looking upwards into his; and then Hetty had given him her hand, and there was something in the soft clinging touch of the little fingers which melted him still more. He could not help adding :

"I thought you had given up coming to the week-day service altogether. You have not been here for a long time."

"No," said Hetty. How glad she was he had given her an opportunity of explaining, and yet she blushed

dreadfully over the process. "I could not help it." Mrs. Pentreath kept me at home. She said she wanted me of a morning."

"*Mrs. Pentreath!*" repeated the vicar, sceptically; but indeed, Hetty's blushes were misleading. "I thought she never got up till after you got back; but I don't at all doubt"—this very coldly—"that you were wanted, and I did not mean to reproach you."

"Ah, but I was not wanted really," with a quickness born of the chill distrust in Mr. Hamilton's tone. That he should suspect her was too much. "Mrs. Pentreath said so, but it was—I don't mind telling you, because you know all about it already—because of her son. He came with me three or four times—do you remember?—and when she found it out she stopped my going. I was very, very sorry, but I could not help it."

"And Ernest was sorry too, I daresay," said the vicar, "but, after all, as he can see plenty of you at home, he ought to have been content with that."

"His contentment had nothing to do with it," said Hetty, warmly. "I did not come to church for him, as Mrs. Pentreath might have known."

"But he came to church for you, as she also knew, by his staying away directly you did. I don't think she should have interfered with your liberty in consequence; but considering her views on certain subjects you can hardly blame her for doing so. Many mothers would have done the same."

"And you think I should have said nothing about it? You would have liked me to stay away from church of my own accord if Captain Pentreath chose

to go with me? I did not expect you to say that," cried Hetty, much hurt, and with moistening eyes. But George Hamilton was not looking at them, and his voice sounded harder than ever.

"Nor do I say it. I should be very sorry to offer any opinion as to the relations between you and my cousin. They have nothing to do with me, as I told you on the one occasion on which we spoke of them."

"And I told you then that there were *no* relations between us—absolutely none," cried Hetty, more hotly than before. "He began by being kind and friendly to me, and I used to talk and laugh with him. I liked him. I don't mind saying so; but that was all, every bit of it; and since Mrs. Pentreath was vexed by it, even that is at an end. He would like to be kinder still to me, I believe, but I will not let him. I never walk with him. I hardly ever speak to him. I keep out of his way. I am rude—positively *rude*. Even Mrs. Pentreath acknowledges it, and you—don't you believe it that you look at me so? Is it possible that you disbelieve me, that you think there is anything between us even now?"

"Yes, I do think so. I do disbelieve you—God help me!" cried the vicar, harshly. "I would give my right hand not to do so, but how can I avoid it? What can I think of the girl who talks to me like this—the girl whose nature I thought was as pure and spotless as the flowers on the altar within there, and who, nevertheless, I saw with my own eyes, not an hour after the scene in which she professed so much grief and indignation at her guardian's unjust accusations, walking side by side with the object of those accusations in a lonely lane at

sundown ; he telling her that he would lay down his life to please her, and she—she assuring him of the happiness his words gave her?—There, I did not mean to make you blush, Miss Mavors, and I ought rightly to apologise for having overheard even so much of a *tête-à-tête* not intended for me ; but neither of you spoke very low ; and as I passed you, coming back from seeing old Betts, along the fields by the towing-path, I could hardly avoid both seeing and hearing—for a minute.”

“The pity was, Mr. Hamilton, that you did not do both for longer,” retorted Hetty.

Truly her colour was brilliant, as the vicar said, and she panted a little as she spoke, but her eyes met his dauntlessly, and there was half a angry, half scornful smile on her pretty red lips which made the vicar’s heart beat more quickly in spite of himself. Even a lover’s jealousy could not construe the expression into that of a girl convicted in an unseemly love-affair.

“It seems to me,” she went on, “that people who overhear things always manage to stop short just when their doing so would be of any use. I did tell Captain Pentreath that if he was in earnest in what he said it would make me very happy and—— *What else?* Go on, Mr. Hamilton.”

“How can I tell what else?” said the vicar, somewhat confused in his turn, but speaking quickly and abruptly as usual, “I am not an eavesdropper or a spy. Do you think I stopped to listen?”

“I wish you had,” said Hetty, “for then you would have heard me ask him to go away and leave me. He said he would do anything to please me, and that was the only thing I wanted. I had gone out by myself

because my head ached from crying, and I wanted a little fresh air. Captain Pentreath was in town. We had no idea that he was even coming back to dinner, and when he overtook me on the towing-path, and said he had come there to find me, I was so vexed that I could have cried again. I did all I could to drive him away. I was sulky, almost rude; but he would not go; and then he began to talk nonsense, and I begged him to leave me. He was very unwilling, for of course he knew he had done nothing to vex me, and thought someone had been making mischief between us, and that made him angry and inclined to say foolish things, which he wouldn't have done otherwise. When he saw that I was really in earnest, however, and wanted him to leave me, he did so, and I came home by myself. You know that, for I met you—How well I remember it!—and you—*cut* me . . . Oh, yes, not rudely or vulgarly; you bowed, of course, but you cut me all the same, and you know it. You have been very unjust to me, Mr. Hamilton; as unjust and unkind as Mrs. Pentreath. But after all it does not matter. I have no claim on either of you; and if I have no one else to take care of me, I—I can—can take care of myself quite well.”

Now, it is a very good thing for young women to have proud, independent spirits of their own, and to make proud, independent speeches for the destruction and humiliation of other people; but if they want to be taken at their word they should not have tiny round faces which turn from red to white, and pale and quiver like a baby's at the smallest provocation, nor great liquid brown eyes that flash and sparkle like a little

stream under a wintry sun ; nor a voice that falters and droops like broken music, and above all—above all—they must not cry, not if they have bonnet-strings at any rate.

George Hamilton saw one big pearly drop splash down and stain the crimson ribbons tied in a cosy bow under the little round chin of the girl he loved as she stood there, flushed, defiant, and prettier than ever, a slender, fur-clad figure on the cold grey stones under the cold grey sky, and with the leafless elm-boughs tossing over her head ; and, despite all his previous convictions, all his efforts at hardening himself against what he considered a weak and hopeless passion, he gave way at once.

“Don’t, Hetty, don’t say that, my child, my love !” he entreated, taking both her hands and drawing her almost forcibly within the shelter of the porch which she had quitted. “You have a claim on me, the greatest a woman can have on any man, for I love you. I have loved you ever since you first came here, and it nearly broke my heart to think that I had not only lost you, but that you could deceive me. Dear Hetty, forgive me, be just to me. What else could a jealous man think, knowing how Ernest admired you, and how successful he is with women generally ? And, oh, my darling, tell me now, for pity’s sake, do you care for him at all, or have I any hope ?”

* * * * *

Early service at St. Gudule’s began at eight o’clock and lasted about half an hour, so Hetty was usually back long before the lazily-luxurious ten o’clock meal which was called breakfast at Guelder Lodge, and

comprised more courses and dainties than often go to a middle-class dinner. On the present occasion she was considerably later than usual, and thought herself still more so when she espied, as she came up the drive, the stately figure of Mrs. Pentreath, who usually was not down till the last moment before breakfast, seated in an armchair before the dining-room window, with her gold-mounted eyeglasses on her nose, and reading her letters with as tranquil an air as though to be up and dressed thus early was quite a normal occurrence with her. Hetty, however, was quite startled by the sight, and congratulated herself on having forbidden the vicar to come home with her, as, in the joy and content of his unlooked-for happiness, he was exceedingly anxious to do. Nothing, indeed, would he have liked better than to have been allowed to march in to breakfast, with his small sweetheart on his arm, and then and there announce his engagement, and ask his aunt's congratulations (her approval he took as a matter of course) on the same. Unfortunately—very unfortunately, as it happened—however, Hetty would not hear of such a thing. Her guardian's previous suspicions had wounded the child's pride and modesty to the quick, and the mere thought that it might be said that, foiled in securing one lover, she had gone to church to catch another was enough to send the sensitive blood burning to her cheeks, and though she could not refuse the vicar the few words he asked for, especially when those words were the seal of her happiness as well as his, she was in such a tremble of agitation after she had uttered them, and so eager to escape immediately, that Mr. Hamilton felt it would

be cruel and ungenerous to detain her; and consoled himself with the reminder that as it was her visiting day in the district they would be sure to meet in the course of the afternoon, when she had grown a little calmer and less shy of him in his new capacity.

Of late he had gone out of his way to avoid such meetings, and had succeeded at the cost of as much pain to himself as to his fair young colleague and parishioner; but to-day there would be no more necessity for such self-sacrifice; and when they parted with a long fervent hand-clasp on his side, and one shyly tender glance from Hetty's dark eyes ere she ran across the street and disappeared in the chill November mist, the Rev. George Hamilton was as happy a man as could well be found.

CHAPTER V.

"THEN TRUST ME ALL IN ALL, OR NOT AT ALL."

IT was not by chance that Mrs. Pentreath happened to be downstairs when Hetty returned from St. Gudule's. Of all evil spirits difficult to lay, when they have once been raised up, the spirit of suspicion is the most difficult. Yesterday Mrs. Pentreath had been really touched by Hetty's subdued manner and pale cheeks ; and had felt anxious to give her a proof of confidence ; yet so mischievous was that lurking spirit, that even the girl's glad gratitude for the trifling favour accorded her was sufficient to stir him into fresh activity, and the vision of that interrupted *tête-à-tête* set him to work again as vigorously as ever.

If these young people, her own son and the girl who owed everything to her bounty, were really capable of scheming vulgarly for her deception, then it was right that they should be convicted and exposed as speedily as possible ; wherefore, Mrs. Pentreath, much to the disgust of her maid, and not a little to her own, had herself called and dressed a full hour before her usual time, only to find (she hardly knew whether to her vexation or satisfaction) that though Miss Mavors was up and out even before she descended, Ernest was still snugly in bed, and turning his customarily deaf ear to announcements of hot water and breakfast, even

after the latter had become a visible fact, and was smoking appetisingly upon the table.

Hetty came in rather shyly. If the vicar had gone home to his breakfast in a sufficiently jubilant mood, hers was not much less happy. To know that she was no longer alone in the world, a solitary little waif belonging to no one in particular; but an object of importance, holding another person's happiness in her hands, and that person the one of all others in the world whom she most admired and revered, was enough of itself to make her so happy that she was almost afraid to lift her eyes lest the inward joy shining through those tell-tale windows should betray her secret too soon; and this timidity was increased to a nervous flutter by the unexpected sight of Mrs. Pentreath and the dread of being questioned as to the cause of her lateness.

She need not have had any such fear, however. Once satisfied as to the fact of Ernest's whereabouts, that young man's mother cared very little about the lesser one of Hetty's being five or ten minutes late; and though the consciousness of having put herself to considerable inconvenience by her over-suspiciousness gave a slight touch of irritability to her manner, she took pains to show Hetty that this was not directed against her by cutting short her apologies with a good-humoured readiness which greatly relieved the girl's mind.

Yet she could not help noticing that her young *protégée* was looking more lovely than usual; her bright eyes soft and dreamy with a new delicious tenderness quite unlike their wonted sauciness, and

her cheeks wearing so rich and rosy a livery as a man must have been blind indeed not to see and admire. Be as cautious as he might, Captain Pentreath could not take his eyes off her once he had contributed his presence to the breakfast-table, and his mother thought to herself, with a half-amused annoyance, "If saying her prayers in a cold church and running home afterwards makes the little monkey look as pretty as that, I almost wish, for Ernest's sake, I hadn't let her go at all."

If Mrs. Pentreath had only known what caused that brilliant illumination she would have clasped her hands for thankfulness, and been ready to embrace both the engaged couple out of the fulness of her heart; but her severity had overshot its mark. She had neither taken into account Hetty's affection for herself, nor the innocent liveliness natural to a young and healthy girl; but had spoken to her as to any vulgar-minded unscrupulous young woman, bent only on achieving a good match; and the result was in every way unfortunate to both of them. In the first place it taught Hetty to fear and distrust where before she had felt nothing but love and confidence, and if it did not make her absolutely dislike her patroness, it robbed her of all feeling of reliance on the latter's kindness and justice. Further, on the present day, it almost brought about an actual quarrel between her and her *fiancé*.

It is easier, men say, to bear a three years' separation from a woman who does not belong to you, and is never likely to do so, than three hours from one who does, and that so recently that her acquisition has not

yet lost its value. Hetty's heart thrilled, and her long eyelashes drooped before the look of passionate gladness which greeted her in the vicar's eyes when she met him that afternoon. They were pleasant eyes at all times, straightforward, blue, and kindly, but grave usually, and stern sometimes. *That* expression Hetty had never seen in them till then; and certainly no woman before her had ever heard from him the whispered "My darling!" which accompanied it, and brought her small hand to nestle into his with an answering glance of shy, loving gratitude.

But the quarrel was to come, and began in this wise:

"And now I've got to tell Aunt Julia that I am going to steal her house-fairy; so when shall I come about it—this evening?" said the vicar, cheerfully, as he and his young sweetheart walked slowly and happily in the direction of a certain poor cottage, rather outside the village; and the words, natural as they were, made the girl start violently, and look up at him in a dismay for which he was not at all prepared.

"*This evening!*" she repeated, almost with a gasp. "Oh, no, no! How can you even think of such a thing? Not nearly so soon; not for a long time yet. Please, please, don't! Indeed you mustn't."

The vicar looked at her in frank astonishment.

"Mustn't tell her!" he repeated! "but why not? Surely, my darling child, you're not ashamed of your goodness to me?"

"Ashamed! No, of course not, but——"

"Then why not let it be known?"

"But not just yet—not at once. Oh, George, please

don't be in a hurry. You don't know how unpleasant things have been at the Lodge of late."

"I can guess at it from what you've told me, dear, and it's just to put an end to this unpleasantness that I want to have you in my own care as soon as possible. You won't be afraid to trust yourself to me, Hetty?"

"No, indeed," she said, warmly, and nestling her hand a little closer into the arm on which it lay, "but it is so sudden, and Mrs. Pentreath—— George, can't we wait a little before saying anything to anyone? It is enough pleasure for me to know that you care for me. Yesterday I thought no one did; and now if Mrs. Pentreath were to be unkind, or try to take you away from me——"

"She might *try*," said the young vicar, gaily, "but as the effort would be entirely futile, I hope she won't be foolish enough to make it. Why should you credit her with such a wish, however? Have you any reason to think she would object to me as a husband for you?"

"N—no, except that she objects to *me*! She does not like me at all now."

"Nay, that I can't believe. My aunt is a jealous autocratic woman, and apt to turn rusty if any of her whims are crossed; but I am sure she loves you, and from something she once dropped I am not at all certain that she would not be really pleased to hear that we cared for one another."

"Oh, Mr. Hamilton, I don't think so."

"I do, so let us prove which is right. Come, Hetty," laying his other hand reassuringly over the one whose trembling he could feel upon his arm, "this is only

foolish nervousness, and I love you too well to bear with it. Our secret must be known sooner or later, why not out with it at once?"

"Oh, not quite at once! Surely that isn't necessary. Couldn't we wait just a little bit—till—till Captain Pentreath is gone, at least?"

"Captain Pentreath!"

"Yes," she said, so eagerly that she missed the tone of his voice as he repeated the name after her. "He will be gone quite soon. His new regiment is under orders for Canada; and he will not want to spend all his leave in this quiet place. Only yesterday he was talking of running over to Paris for a few weeks. Promise me not to say anything till he is gone. Do!" and she looked up beseechingly into his eyes, not, however, to find them beaming on her as they had been awhile ago, but dark with an expression of mingled surprise and displeasure before which she shrank instinctively.

"That is a strange request!" he said, slowly. "What in the name of Heaven can Captain Pentreath have to do with you or me in the matter of our engagement? His mother is your guardian, of course, but he—what is he to you?"

There was no mistaking his tone now. Hetty had made a mistake, and being frightened she stammered and bungled, and made matters worse in her anxiety to mend them.

"Nothing—nothing, of course," she said, hurriedly, "except that if he—I mean if Mrs. Pentreath were vexed it would be so horrid for me—worse than it is now, and——"

"'If *he* were vexed!' That is what you were going to say, I think; and what right, pray, has he to be vexed in such a matter?"

"None, none; only—Oh, George, you know what his mother has been saying about—about me and him."

"I do, and that is why I am anxious to show her, with the least possible delay, how wrong she was in her assumptions. My dear little love, it is for your own good and dignity. Can't you trust me to consider them?"

His tone was very gentle and caressing again, so gentle that Hetty thought he had come down to pleading, and foolishly persisted.

"No, because she would not believe you. I know she would not. She would think," crimsoning all over, and speaking in a whisper strongly suggestive of tears, "that it was only because she had put a stop to—to—the other—I mean that I wanted to get married to *someone*, it didn't matter whom."

For a moment the vicar made no answer; and if the tears had not been so near Hetty's eyes that she had no courage to look up at him, she would have seen a sudden colour come into his face, the quick startled flush of a man newly confronted with an idea at once painful and repugnant to him. Suggested by anyone else, indeed, he would simply have flung it aside with indignant contempt; but put before him by Hetty herself, and emphasised by the poor child's shamefaced blushes and faltering lips, it met him with unpleasant force; and against his will there shot through him a horrible thought piercing him like a poisoned arrow:

What if it were true; and, if not, how should the imagination of it have come into her mind?

"That is a curious supposition," he said at last, and in an altered voice—a very grave one. "I do not understand how it could have occurred to you unless——Hetty, be frank with me, I beseech you. Do you remember what you said to me only this morning, that you had not the slightest caring for Pentreath except as a friend?"

"Of course I do; and it is true. Oh, surely you believe me!"

"Certainly I believe you; but if I am to do so, and if I am also to believe what you said of him when we first spoke on the matter, that his attentions to you were also purely friendly and playful, such as a brother might pay you, in fact, and his mother had no right to object to, what can induce you to speak of him now in the way you do; or to make him an obstacle to the announcement of our engagement?"

It was Hetty's turn to be silent now. Truly she had said so, and at the time she had believed what she said; but since then, few weeks ago as it was, she seemed to have grown years older and wiser, and her eyes had been opened to the meaning of many things unnoticed before. Besides, Captain Pentreath's manner had certainly altered in at least an equal degree. There was nothing in it that even she could honestly call brotherly now, and enough of something so different as to make her shrink with timid dread from anything like a scene, or even from such further comments from his mother as might be produced by announcing her engagement to some one else whilst living in the same

house with him; yet how say this to anyone without seeming to give the lie to her former protestations; and how say it to George Hamilton, in especial, who had already proved that he could be more than a little jealous, and who was now looking at her, as she felt, with angry astonishment? In her embarrassment at not being able to find an answer she blushed more than ever, and by so doing added to Mr. Hamilton's annoyance.

He was very much in love with this fair young pupil and parishioner of his, and fully believed in her love for himself. He believed, too, that she was the very essence of all that was innocent and pure, yet at the same time he could not help remembering that he had heard his cousin speak of her in terms sufficiently light and familiar to indicate an intimacy which had pained and angered him even then when he had no right to resent it, and the mere remembrance of which at present filled him with an agony of wounded pride and jealousy stronger still than love.

For a minute he waited, hoping that Hetty would answer, and silence the horrible doubt which had arisen in him; but when she did not speak his impatience became too great for his self-control, and he stopped short, dropping almost unconsciously the arm which had been supporting her hand to his side, so that they stood apart.

"Hetty," he said, then, trying to speak gently, though what the effort cost him might have been guessed by anyone who had seen the drops standing on his brow, "I don't quite understand you. I asked you a question, and, instead of answering it, you are

silent. Is it because you are offended with me, or because—— My dear, be frank with me. You don't know how I love you, or how dear you are to me; so dear that if it was a choice between my happiness and yours, between losing you altogether, or taking you with even one grain of reluctance on your part, one shadow of regret for another, I would give you up this moment, and do my utmost for you instead in the way you preferred; only, Hetty dear, don't let there be anything between us, anything my wife could not say to me, or I to her. I do not believe that it is so. I believe that you do love me; and even if I were not the first—even if you had cared for some one else before me, or had given him the right to think so at any rate, I would rather know it from yourself and now. It would not make me love you less, or blame you, even though it might be a trifle bitter to me just at first. Nay," with a forced laugh and a kindly touch on the girl's cold hands, as he saw the paleness which had come over her cheek, "I did not mean to frighten you, love. Maybe even the bitterness might be wholesome for me. When I was a little lad I had an old Scotch nurse who used to tell me I was 'ower proud than gude,' and pride needs a fall now and then, you know. Only be honest with me, dear."

Hetty looked up at him, her eyes full of tears. That poor attempt at a jest had not at all deceived her, or weakened her perception of what the question really meant to "an ower proud" man. If she had kept silent so long, it was not from coquetry, or even cowardice, but rather from a desire to be perfectly

sincere. She spoke clinging with both hands to the arm which had dropped hers :

"George, there is nothing to tell you, and you must not suspect me. I have never flirted with Captain Pentreath, or given him the least cause to think I cared for him. I might have done so, perhaps," her pretty face flushing ingenuously, "if I hadn't heard that he was a man who said pretty things to every girl he met, and expected them to fall in love with him in return; but I was determined not to fall in love with him. I joked and laughed, and tried to be very kind and friendly with him, because he was Mrs. Pentreath's son, and kind and friendly to me; but I never said a word to him that all the world might not have heard. I never gave him so much as a flower or a sketch, or wrote——"

"My darling, don't go on. That is quite enough, and I am ashamed of myself for asking you. The fact is, I am horribly jealous, and I care for you so much that when Ernest took to rhapsodising about you in——"

"But he had no right to do so, and if you asked him, he would tell you so himself. After all," with a little innocent sauciness, "I cannot help a person's admiring me."

"You couldn't help my doing so, certainly, and I couldn't help it either," said the vicar, laughing, and pressing the little hand more closely against his side. "I was not blaming you, love, because Ernest admires you; only——"

"Only you don't want me to admire him? And I do not; but, George, if you still distrust that in the

very least, do as you wish to do : go up to the Lodge and tell Mrs. Pentreath of our engagement. She cannot be much more disagreeable than she has been to me of late ; and if I wanted you to wait till her son was gone, it was only because unpleasantness of that sort is so much worse before a man, and I thought he would make it still more so. Do as you like about it, however."

But the vicar had been put on his mettle and would not listen to such a suggestion. His little sweetheart had been too generous for him not to be generous on his side, and he declared she should choose her own time for the avowal. For the present, at any rate, he would be content, and more than content, to enjoy the knowledge of his happiness in private, and wait on her pleasure for the rest. So the quarrel which had threatened to be so serious blew over like a summer cloud : the lovers parted even more tenderly than they had met ; and when Mrs. Pentreath saw the yet lovelier rose colour in the girl's cheek that evening, she said to herself in despair :

"It's no use, the little monkey is prettier than any girl in the neighbourhood, and Ernest would be a bat if he couldn't see it. How can that stupid George have been blind enough not to do so!"

All of which prove how excessively foolish it was for Hetty to beg for silence on her engagement, and for George Hamilton to accede to it.

They met again next day at early service, but only for a moment. Hetty had been made nervous by Mrs. Pentreath's unexpected appearance at the dining-room window on the previous day, and was in a desperate

hurry to get back quickly on this occasion. She said that she felt sure her guardian had suspected something, and though Mr. Hamilton laughed at her and called her a terrible coward, he was too kind-hearted to detain her against her will.

She would not even let him accompany her, but rushed off, turning her bright face back for one tantalising little nod at him before she disappeared round the corner, and making the vicar say to himself in half-humorous desperation:

"If I don't persuade Ernest to start for Paris before another week, I'll be shot. I'm not going to have my little girl frightened of any one now I've got the right to take care of her."

Perhaps it was to exercise this right, or perhaps only to get a longer vision of the little figure so dear to him on its homeward route, that the vicar, instead of turning off to his own house, re-entered the church and ran upstairs to the gallery where the choir were in the habit of sitting. There was a window there from which he could get a view of the road which, after skirting Kew Green, passed the walls of Guelder Lodge, and could thus have the pleasure, such as it was, of at least seeing his sweetheart within her own gate.

On this occasion the pleasure was a very negative one. The little figure was there, it is true, just coming into view round a turn of the road, and clearly enough distinguishable in its neat dark ulster and cap, the trim rounded outlines sharply defined against the background of white pavement and blue sky, where the rosy colour of morning yet lingered in a crimson

stain ; the small well-poised head thrown a little back as though to meet the frosty breeze which gave a backward sweep to her draperies from the tiny swift-stepping feet. But the feet were not stepping as briskly now as when they had left him, and the face might not have been raised to court the crisp morning air, but to meet the down-bent glance of the tall, square-shouldered young man who was walking at her side ; the man whom, by his whole cut and bearing, no less than by his erect soldierly figure, Mr. Hamilton recognised as his cousin, Ernest Pentreath !

CHAPTER VI.

THE MAN UNMASKED.

DOOR Hetty! The surprise to her of finding Captain Pentreath at her side as she turned round the first corner from the church was at least as unpleasant as it was great; and her violent start, coupled with the tone in which she uttered his name would have said as much to most men not abnormally conceited. It said nothing to Captain Pentreath. He only laughed good-humouredly, as he put out his hand to her and exclaimed:

“Why, Miss Mavors, how you jumped! I really thought you were going over my head. Please take my arm and hold tight, or we shall have you flying away altogether. One would think you hadn’t expected to see me.”

“*Expected to see you!* But I did not,” Hetty exclaimed in almost angry astonishment, and taking no notice of the proffered arm.

Captain Pentreath smiled quietly:

“What, because I didn’t turn up yesterday? My dear child, it was from my care for you that I abstained, and if I had only had a chance of speaking to you during the day, I should have told you so. I guessed from something in my mother’s manner the night before that she was on the *qui vive*, and meant to

surprise us ; so I stayed in bed on purpose, and let her have the trouble of getting up early (which I know she hates) for nothing. She won't do it again. Her maid had orders to call her an hour later than usual this morning, and directly I heard it I gave similar ones, and then got up, without calling, as soon as ever I heard you go out, and followed you—with this difference, however, that as I walked out of the French-window in my room in preference to the front-door, the household probably imagine that I am still in the arms of "Murphy," and are at the present moment depositing cans of hot water outside my chamber portal in that happy delusion."

"And why do you want them to imagine it?" said Hetty with great coolness considering how fast her heart was beating between fright and anger; yet she knew nothing of that choir-window, by the way! "I am very stupid, but—— I don't understand you at all," she was going to say, but it was a foible of Captain Pentreath's to like doing most of the talking himself, and he broke in:

"Why? Because my mother's absurd folly makes it necessary. But, Hetty, you are looking grave; and if you didn't understand my motive I must indeed have seemed a brute to you to stay in bed like a log when you were sweet enough to take my hint so readily, and act on it at once."

"Your *hint*, Captain Pentreath!"

"Yes, *re* the church going. Don't you remember the *mater* interrupting us just as I was telling you about it. You are so quick, however, that I knew you had understood already, and though, you see, she sus-

pected too, I couldn't think of any other way of getting hold of you."

"Getting hold of me for what, Captain Pentreath?" and then Hetty did manage to get out her former sentence: "I don't understand you in the least; and I wish very much that you would not come to meet me and talk in this way. Your mother would be very much vexed if she knew of it, and," with a great effort, for she saw a look of unbounded surprise growing slowly in his eyes, and her small stock of courage began to waver, "I do not like it either; not at all."

Captain Pentreath stared and then smiled a little. He had been inclined to be annoyed; but it occurred, to him that the little girl was cross because she had been left to take her walk alone on the previous day; and after all she was pretty enough to be allowed a few airs. He set himself to pacify her at once.

"What is it that you don't like, Hetty?" he said, softly. "That the *mater* should be vexed? I assure you I don't like it either, and I think it abominable of her to have made you so uncomfortable, and spoilt all our fun in the way in which she has done of late; but it's partly your own fault, and that's one of the things I've been wanting to say to you. You shouldn't give in to her so much, or let her tyrannise over you. I don't. In fact I like to pay you more attention whenever I think she has been sitting on you; and there is really no need for you to be so afraid of her. She couldn't eat you for talking to me; and she knows that if she tried I should make her sorry for it. It's a very bad plan to give in to a woman who likes power, and my mother loves it. The more people yield to her,

the more she'll bully them ; and it was chiefly to tell you this, and because your sweet sad face made me so miserable, that I threw out the feeler about exercise and early services. If you knew," with a laugh of conscious merit, "how I hate turning out in this confounded weather you'd think it a magnanimous suggestion ; .but I really couldn't devise any other way for our getting a little talk together, you were so desperately careful not to offend the powers that be. My dear Hetty, there is no occasion for it. Only trust me to take care of you and you shall be quite safe ; but if you run away from me in the way in which you have been doing of late I shall have to run away too. Don't you know that it is only your sweet smiles that makes life at the Lodge bearable to me, and that if I am to stay there I can't do without them ? Give me one now at any rate, to show me I am forgiven for letting you come out alone, and to reward me for walking up and down here in the cold all the while you were in at your prayers. I should have been there too, by the way, but for my cousin. Upon my soul, Hetty, I believe it is he who has put my mother up to all this nonsense."

"Captain Pentreath !"

"I do. You needn't look so astounded, Hamilton is a parson ; but parsons are no different from other men, except that they are meaner. Hetty, I'll tell you a secret. It's he who's at the bottom of all this. He *wants you for himself !*"

Poor Hetty felt as if she had been struck dumb. It was one of those crisis in which the very injustice and absurdity of the situation seem to make speech or

defence alike impracticable, at the very moment when both are most needed.

She wanted to answer this man, to silence him and put him down; and, instead, his flow of words and assurance together, so took away her breath, that she seemed to have no words in which to reply to him. To listen to him anyone would have thought that there was some private understanding between them, and that of such a nature as to justify Mrs. Pentreath's worst accusations.

Yet, on the other hand, though Captain Pentreath's words, looks, and manner were all those of a lover (and what can be easier than for a girl of spirit to dismiss an unwelcome lover?) this particular girl could not help feeling keenly that there was not one of them which might not be made to wear another interpretation—which might not, indeed, have quite another explanation if he chose to put it on them.

It was her old difficulty, and yet something must be done to put a stop to this sort of thing, and done at once. It still wanted nearly an hour to breakfast time, and he had said that Mrs. Pentreath would be late that morning. It was a fine, bright morning too, with a white frost glittering on the short thin grass of the Green, and on the dark shining leaves of the laurels and laurestinus bushes in the gardens of the old-fashioned red-brick houses skirting it. Low down in the east a big wintry sun was just struggling from above a network of clouds, grey and rose-colour, with crimson streaks between. The great iron gates of Kew Gardens were glittering in the sunbeams, and the tall trees beyond stood out like a spider's web, in the delicate

tracery of their leafless boughs, against the blue sky. Hetty stopped short, looking her companion full in the face, and trying to keep down the colour in her own, as she said :

“ I must ask you not to speak of Mr. Hamilton in that way, Captain Pentreath. You are quite wrong. He never made mischief between your mother and me. It is you, whether you mean it or not, who are doing so by following me about in this manner, and trying to speak to me in private, when I have shown you as plainly as I can that I do not like it ; and when you must know that your doing so causes her to say harsh and bitter things to me.”

“ Harsh things to you ! Hetty, I never knew it. Fancy anyone—my mother especially—speaking harshly to such a dear little fairy ! I wish I had heard her, that’s all. She would never have done so a second time.”

Hetty winced. Would nothing check him, or show him that it was herself as well as his mother that he was displeasing, and why, *why* had she not tried to do so from the beginning ? She remembered distinctly now, a previous occasion when he had called her a fairy. He had done it in a playful, good-natured way as she sprang up to reach for a spray of light-coloured autumn leaves they were passing on their walk, and she had not even frowned, thinking nothing of it ; but now—— She made a great effort, and said quietly ;

“ That is nonsense, Captain Pentreath, and I wish you would leave off talking it and go home. I would rather not walk with you.”

Ernest laughed and retorted :

“*That* is rude, Miss Mavors, at least it would be if I believed you ; but, fortunately, I don’t, and therefore I like you a great deal too well to obey.”

At that Hetty fairly lost her temper, and answered hotly that she did mean it ; that if she had had the least idea he would have followed her, she should have stayed at home, and that if he persisted in it, that was what she must do in future. She got up early to go to church and say her prayers, not for foolishness and—and flirting. Which last word she jerked out, remembering how good she had been in refusing to linger even with her betrothed, and then blushed up like a rose. Ernest took advantage of the blush, and said innocently :

“*Flirting!* Good Heavens, who is flirting? Not I, I assure you.” and getting no answer shrugged his shoulders with an injured air, and remarked in plaintive *sotto voce* : “And all this because I didn’t keep tryst yesterday ! I never thought Queen Esther had it in her to be so savage with her poor subjects.”

“Captain Pentreath,” said Hetty, firmly, “if you had come yesterday you would have heard the same ; and the only difference would have been that I should have stayed at home to-day. You are talking as if I had come out in obedience to some hint of yours ; but I did no such thing ; and instead of playing into your hands to deceive your mother, as you seem to think I am capable of doing, I was more deceived than she was ; for I never suspected you of having made any plan, or thrown out any hint at all ; and, from what you say, she did. I do not want to be rude to you, but you force me to speak plainly, and I cannot avoid it.”

"My dear Miss Hetty," said Ernest, smoothly (but God help the woman who could provoke the expression in his eyes which lighted them at that moment!), "you could not be rude if you tried, and your plainness is adorable. Will you think me very rude, however, if I suggest that this virtuous reprobation of my society is rather a new phase in a young lady who until the present time not only showed no aversion to it, but rather encouraged—I suppose I may not say suggested—my accompanying her to St. Gudule's and back of a morning."

Poor Hetty blushed furiously, but said, though in a faltering voice, that that was a long time ago, before she knew Mrs. Pentreath disapproved of it.

"Then," said Ernest, more smoothly still, "it is *she* who disapproves of my company for you—not you; and she who makes plans to deceive you—not *I*, who only try to protect you from them! But, indeed," with a subtle change of tone which somehow made Hetty shrink, "I fear both she and I are only being made the scapegoats for somebody else in this matter. You were wonderfully warm in defending my cousin George just now—and I see you can colour at his name. Is it at all possible that he is the cause of this change, and that in throwing me over you want to secure him?" And this he uttered with such a sudden blaze of anger and contempt, as seemed to imply that the mere idea of anyone who "having known him could decline," on such a "lower nature" as that of the vicar of St. Gudule's, was a possibility too derogatory to a woman to be even mentioned without disdain.

In truth, it was more than he himself could con-

template with anything like calmness. A moment back he had been really debating within himself whether the girl were only a timid goose, frightened out of her wits by his mother's severity, or a clever little coquette, making use of the latter to draw him on to a proposal; and on both these suppositions had felt more than half inclined to let her alone and trouble himself no more about her. The bare idea, however, that there might be a rival in the field, and that rival the cousin whom he less than liked already, was enough to rouse his vanity in an instant to pricking-point, and determined him not to let her slip without a struggle.

True, for aught he knew, George Hamilton might mean to marry her, while he had not the smallest intention of doing anything of the sort; but that had nothing to do with the matter. He had condescended to patronise the girl and "bring her out," as he called it, and in return he looked on her as his exclusive property, and believed in all good faith that she cherished a warm and tender admiration for him which all her shyness and sauciness could not wholly conceal.

Under these circumstances, to have her play him false, or stand by and see another man appropriate her without making it as disagreeable as possible for both of them was out of the question.

For a moment, indeed, he waited, hoping and expecting that she would indignantly deny the insinuation he had so contemptuously thrown out; but anger and jealousy were mounting higher with each instant, and when he found that she made no answer save by the rich colour which mantled in her face, he could

restrain himself no longer, and burst into a torrent of reproaches directed against her fickleness and falsehood, and bitter enough to drive the blood out of the girl's cheeks.

She bore it as long as she could, and then faced round upon him in desperation, repeating the words after him :

“*Fickle! False!* How can you say such things? When I was either, or how could I be—to you? You have been kind to me and friendly and I was grateful to you. I *liked* you ; but you are destroying all that. I shall never like you any more, I could never even wish to see you if you speak to me in this way.”

“You mean that you like Master George better, or rather that you think the well-to-do parson in possession is better than a poor soldier with expectations only. Hetty, I would not have believed it of you. I thought you were an innocent loving girl—one who could care for me as much as I did for her.”

“And that could be very little,” cried Hetty. The girl's spirit was thoroughly roused, and she turned her lovely face on him, flashing with scorn, and quite unsoftened by the would-be tenderness of his last appeal. “If you cared for me in the least, you would not insult me, a fatherless girl, as you are doing now. But it shall never happen again. I see to-day how right your mother was in trying to keep us apart, and when I get back I will tell her so. She shall not think that I, at any rate, am deceiving her ; and as for Mr. Hamilton—— But there ! it does not matter what you say of him or of me either, and he would care for it as little as I do.”

There are men, insignificant and unimportant looking in general, whom real honest anger so improves and dignifies that when under its influence they acquire a warmth and nobility of expression which in a way transfigures and elevates them even in the eyes of their enemies ; and there are others, good-looking ones too, whom, on the other hand, anger deforms and defaces, bringing out all manner of mean and cruel lines which the smooth and handsome features usually obliterate, and making the whole man dwindle into something low and despicable.

It happened in this latter way with Ernest Pentreath. His face grew white and damp, a livid unwholesome white, beneath the lash of Hetty's scorn, and there was a dangerous glitter in his eyes as they met hers, a narrowed, darkling look before which the young girl shrank in involuntary terror.

"So—o—o!" he said, slowly, the word coming like a harsh breath through his teeth. "That is the tune, is it? and Miss Mavors shows herself in her true colours. Ernest Pentreath was good enough to flirt with, and use as a cavalier and attendant, when there was no one else to the fore ; or, better still, when some one else was wanted to be brought to the fore. After that, '*le roi est mort ; vive le roi !*' He may go to the deuce, and some one else reign in his stead. Well, Miss Mavors, 'tis an old enough game, and young as you are, you seem to be an old player at it ; for upon my soul I've rarely seen it carried out more coolly and skilfully. May I congratulate myself as well as your new lover on our joint share in the pretty play, and do you think he will be offended if I offer him the testi-

mony of my small personal experience as to the warmth and liberality of your disposition? His own used to be of a slightly jealous, not to say churlish cast in these matters, if I remember rightly; but I suppose he has got over all that foolishness since he has known you."

Hetty looked up. The flush had quite died out of her face, and her great dark eyes looked dim and distended with a kind of horrified incredulity; the look of one who in a dream sees looming on her some terrible and repulsive vision from which she tries but cannot escape.

"*Oh*," she said with a sort of gasp between the words, "you do not mean that. It cannot be you who are speaking in that way. Yes, I know you are angry, and you have been saying wicked, false, unjust things to me—things you know to be unjust—and I cannot help it. I cannot silence you; but you would not say them to other people, to—to Mr. Hamilton! Even you could not be base enough for that."

Captain Pentreath smiled—not pleasantly.

"*Even I!*" he repeated. "You are polite, Miss Mavors, and yet I think it was you who first suggested talking to other people, and making capital out of my mistaken endeavour to give you pleasure, by misrepresenting me to my mother! Don't you think, after that, the less we say about baseness the better?"

Hetty was silent. The bad dream seemed thickening around her, and making everything seem unreal and phantom-like to her. Was this—could this be the pleasant, playful, softly-speaking young officer whose grace and devotion had made a little queen of

her for a few short weeks ! Her hands grew cold, and her eyes misty with a sort of blank despair which might have touched even Ernest Pentreath, cruel as an angry man can be to a woman who has slighted him, had he been looking at her. As it was, his heart did give him an unpleasant twinge when she turned towards him, a sudden pathetic courage shining out of the altered lines of her pale innocent face.

“ No,” she said, sadly, “ you are right ; it is no good saying anything to you ; and to other people you must say what you like. You will not hurt me with those who know me ; and with others it does not matter. Only let me tell you one thing. Mr. Hamilton has done nothing to injure you in any way. If he had thought that you or I cared for each other he would have kept away himself, and tried to help us, instead of helping to keep us apart ; but it was not so. I was your friend when I did not know what a bad cowardly man you were ; but he was an older friend by far ; and if I liked him better than you, as I did—and do—it was because I knew even then that he was a better man and more worth liking. Say what you please to him. You cannot have anything to say that he does not know ; and he will only despise you, for saying that.”

CHAPTER VII.

IN HIS ROOM AT NIGHT.

IT was the bravest speech our timid little Hetty ever made. Indeed the girl was strung up to that pitch where despair becomes recklessness; but it was an unfortunate bravery all the same, for it banished what little compunction the sight of her small white face had awakened in Captain Pentreath's breast. No man, no soldier, especially, likes to be told that he is a coward, even by so insignificant a being as a little girl whom he has thought to honour by his notice, and the fact that the same suggestion had been more than hinted to him by other parties, and in another land, rather added venom to the wound than helped to deaden it. The mocking, pitiless sneer with which he turned on his young companion had something in it far worse than the curse which good breeding stifled on his lips.

"*Say—what?*" he asked, with an admirable affectation of surprise. "I really beg your pardon, my dear Miss Hetty, but I'm afraid I don't understand you, or what you are referring to by this very heroic speech of yours! So far from quarrelling with my worthy cousin, or injuring you in any way, I had no thought in my mind, I assure you, but of congratulating him on having won the affections of a very clever and charming young lady, and one who, as I have found,

can be as tender and seductive as the most exacting of swains could desire. Surely there is nothing to offend you in that: and as for quarrelling with George, why should I when he has not injured me? Of course I admire you intensely. You don't need me to keep on telling you that, I hope; but I'm not a marrying man. To be so implies a large income nowadays, and I am too poor to afford anything but the lesser bliss of an innocent little flirtation; so if George doesn't grudge me the skimmed cream of that, I won't grudge him the wholesome milk of matrimony beneath. Nay, I'll be more generous than you think, and will even if entreated make over to him such relics of my "good times" as other men might be tempted to keep—*photographs*, I mean, and such like.

Hetty had been hurrying onward, her steps quickening with every word, and her head turned resolutely away in the effort not to hear them. On one thing she was determined—not to answer him. Let him say what he liked, George would believe her not him, she kept repeating to herself; and that being so, what did such a man's insults, however stinging in their bitter irony, signify? But the last part of his sentence so startled her that she forgot her determination of silence, and flashed suddenly round on him a pair of lovely, scornful eyes as she said:

"You must possess such relics before you can be generous with them, Captain Pentreath; and you have none in this case—neither photographs nor anything else."

"No?" he said, his pale angry face breaking into a smile of triumph at having forced her to speak. "Yet

I think this is rather like you. I understood it was a portrait of you at any rate," and he took from an inside pocket of his coat a photograph folded up in tissue paper, which he unwrapped and held up to her. The effect was not what he expected.

"That?" she said, with a little relieved laugh. "Yes, that is me, certainly; but I never gave it you, as you know. It was in my album a week ago, and you must have stolen it. I daresay Mr. Hamilton has heard of men doing that sort of thing before."

"And of writing—let me see what is it? *With best love from E. M.* on the back of their trophies," said Ernest as he slowly turned it round, and read the inscription on the back. "My dear Miss Hetty, no man could be rude enough to refuse to stand you out in anything you say, even though he had stood by, as I am afraid you must remember I did, and saw you write the words you now deny; but is it safe to do so? Your handwriting is rather uncommon. Are you sure Hamilton is not acquainted with it?"

For a moment Hetty stood still gazing at the written words, while the colour slowly died out of her face, and a hunted look came into it like that of some tortured animal.

"Of course he is, and I did write that," she said, hoarsely; "but I never thought or dreamt it was on my photograph. You came across the room with one, and asked me to scribble those words on it. You said it was one of yours which you wanted to send to a friend by that post, but that you had sprained your finger. . . I knew you were called Ernest Meredith Pentreath, and I thought the *E. M.* stood for the two

first names. You *meant* me to think so, and you laid the card on the table face downwards. I never even saw the other side."

"Of course not! I see. So that is how it is to run! Surely it sounds a little too innocent, though. I'm afraid Hamilton might be sceptical. He's not a man of much faith. Shall we try him, however?"

Hetty made no answer, but she looked at him; and perhaps that look, not so much of indignation as of silent shuddering pity, smote nearer to Captain Pen-treath's conscience than any speech could have done. To do him such small justice as he deserved, he had no thought in reality of carrying out his unmanly threats, or of showing George Hamilton the photograph he had so unfairly obtained. He was simply a spoilt child, mad with temper and wounded vanity. Hetty had offended him, "thrown him over," and in the desire to punish her he went further than he had intended. Even now, if she had humbled herself to plead with him, he would have relented and given her back the photograph, perhaps with a kiss into the bargain if he had been lucky enough to get so far; but it was too late for that. They were almost at the gates of Guelder Lodge, and springing from his side, Hetty hurried on so quickly that he had no chance even to overtake her till they reached the front door where the butler was standing looking anxiously up and down the drive with a telegram in his hand. The man came to meet them at once.

"Please, sir," he said, hurriedly, "this has just come for you. I didn't know you were out, and was knocking at your door for some time before

I thought of opening it. The boy's waiting for an answer."

Captain Pentreath tore it open impatiently. Telegrams were common things with him; but as he read this an exclamation of such fury and concern broke from his lips as even checked Hetty in her onward course.

"Tell the boy there's no answer. I'm going to town myself," she heard him say, as still standing in the hall he tore the paper into a thousand pieces. "And here, Hickson, bring me my frock-coat, and take this. Where is my ulster? Make haste, deuce take you! I want to catch the train and I've only five minutes to do it in. What is it? Back to breakfast? Certainly not. Didn't I say I was going to town. Tell your mistress so; and that I shall sleep there to-night.

He was gone with the last words, and Hetty saw his departure with a grateful heart; but how she got through the day that followed she hardly knew. She had meant to carry out her intention of speaking to Mrs. Pentreath before breakfast, but that lady had taken it into her head to breakfast in bed, and sent down word that she was very sleepy, and did not want to see Miss Mavors till she rang for her. Long before that happened, however, poor Hetty was incapacitated from attending to anything. A maddening, terrible headache, the result of the overstrain on her nerves, had come on, and so held her in its merciless grasp that for the rest of the day she was fit for nothing but to lie motionless, and with face pressed down upon a sofa-pillow in a darkened room.

If George Hamilton had been there, he might have

rested the throbbing temples on his breast, and soothed the pain with love's own healing of tender words and touches; but though he had promised to call during the day, he never came; and by the rest she was left in peace at any rate, Mrs. Pentreath contenting herself with sending up her maid now and then to see how the girl was, and make proffers of strong tea with the advice to go to bed as soon as she was able to move.

Hetty took both tea and advice gratefully. She had been going to a party with her guardian that evening; but this headache put it out of the question, and Mrs. Pentreath departed alone, having first looked in on her *protégée* and seen her tucked up in bed and apparently asleep.

Indeed Hetty was so in reality. Sleep had come on as it so often does from the exhaustion following after pain: and when she woke at last it was between ten and eleven o'clock at night, her headache was gone, and the house perfectly quiet. Rising from bed the girl threw on her dressing gown and went to the window. It looked out on the back premises; but she could see that Mrs. Pentreath had not yet returned, for the coach-house door and the yard-gate were both wide open in readiness for the carriage; and from the window of the housekeeper's room below a faint red glow of firelight shone out across the frost-whitened path, over which the shadows of the cedar branches swept softly in the breeze, and gave suggestion that one of the maids was waiting up there for her mistress.

Hetty sat down and began to think. One thing was clear to her already—that she and Captain Pentreath

could not live in the same house any longer. She would not make mischief between him and his mother. On reflection, she thought that would be hardly right, when it might be that her own thoughtlessness and imprudence had brought this trouble on her; but she would ask leave to go away for a little while to visit her mother's relatives, and—she would tell George Hamilton everything. Loving him as she did, she felt sure he would believe her if she could only be beforehand with Captain Pentreath, and prevent her story being forestalled; and at that thought a bright idea seized her—an idea which made her first start, and then flush and tremble all over.

Her photograph! Without that basis to go on, George would hardly be likely even to listen to his cousin's boasts, and would it not be possible for her to get it even now?

While taunting her with it, he had replaced it in his coat-pocket—the rough shooting-coat which he had changed so hurriedly before starting for town after the receipt of the telegram. Might it not be there still? She felt almost sure that in his haste and agitation he had had neither time nor thought for shifting the contents of the pockets; and, if not, what was there to prevent her from slipping into his room and securing her property at once? He was far away in London, Mrs. Pentreath at her party, with Hickson in attendance on her, and the rest of the servants, with the exception of the lady's-maid, in bed. Besides, her chamber was at some distance from the other sleeping-apartments. It was over the kitchen, and at the end of a long corridor, separated by a short flight of stairs

and a baize door from the hall. On the opposite side of the latter, and facing the baize door, was what used to be called the garden-room, but which Ernest had appropriated to himself. She had only to cross the hall, secure the photograph, and be back behind the shelter of that friendly portal in three minutes. Never could an idea seem happier or easier to carry out, if she only was allowed time enough for its execution; and to make the most of what she had she proceeded to put it into practice at once, though with a heart beating so fast from nervousness as almost to make the speed and composure necessary for her expedition things impossible of attainment.

To be caught in Captain Pentreath's room at night, rummaging about among his properties too, how strange it would look even to one of the servants; and what explanation could she give? yet on the other hand there was no real likelihood of her being thus interrupted, when all the domestics were in bed, except the sleepy lady's-maid upstairs, and when even if Mrs. Pentreath were to return in the midst of her investigations the noise of the carriage wheels would give her quite sufficient warning that it was time to beat a retreat.

There was really no danger; and she was not doing any wrong. She was going for her own property, that was all.

But all the same there is always something that savours of danger, if not guilt, in going about a silent house at night when one is anxious not to be overheard. Curtains wave in unfelt draughts, and doors that one expects to find shut stand half open in ghostly

fashion as though some unseen witness was lurking in the act to spring out from the black darkness within. Stairs, solid as a rock in general, creak beneath the softest pressure of a little naked foot. Even one's own hushed breathing sounds in one's ears like the hoarse gasps of some enemy crouching at one's side, and the click of a door-handle like an alarm clock loud and startling enough to rouse every sleeping inmate of the house. It is an uncanny thing to be the only person awake and moving in a large house ; and early as the hour really was at present Hetty's heavy sleep had confused her sense of time ; and it was a real comfort to her when on emerging from the dark corridor and stairway into the warm, gas-lit hall she saw, by a glance at the big clock, that it was not yet half-past ten.

Hitherto fortune had favoured her, for, beyond those noises born of her own nervous terrors, she had neither heard nor made a sound as she glided, barefooted and with bated breath, through the quiet house ; and now as she crept into Captain Pentreath's room she was almost startled into an exclamation of pleasure at finding that, though the blinds were down, the pure white moonlight filtering through them had filled the room with a pale illumination which not only showed her every object in the room with sufficient distinctness ; but that particular one of which she was in search.

She had been distressing herself with vain wondering as to what she should do if Hickson had put the coat away in one of his master's drawers. It would be a difficult task to hunt for it in the dark, for the hall gas only cast a faint glimmer into the room, and she

dared not strike a light lest it should attract attention to her presence there; but heaven, and the old butler's forgetfulness, had been better to her than she hoped; and not only was there sufficient light for all her needs, but in the very centre of it, hanging over the back of a chair before her delighted eyes, was the identical coat Ernest had flung off in his hurry to depart that morning. Hetty made but one step to it, and then—for the second time that night, a little joyful cry half rose to her lips and had to be strangled with difficulty; for at the very first dive of her slender fingers into the pockets they closed over something smooth and flat which instinct told her was the object of her quest; and she was just drawing it to the surface, her heart beating joyfully, and her mouth rippling with a little mischievous laugh, when she stopped short, the mirth frozen suddenly upon her lips, and her distended eyes fixed in a glassy horrible stare as she became aware of a certain low sound at once startling and familiar to her—the faint, grating noise of a latch-key in the front door.

And there was no one in that house who had a latchkey except Captain Pentreath!

For a second—less, perhaps, but it seemed an eternity to her—the girl stood still, struck dumb and motionless with the very horror of her position. She had thought him miles away, and there was no chance even of his returning till next day, and now—— Oh, God in Heaven! what should she—what *could* she do? To escape was impossible. Before she could cross the hall he would be in it. To be found there by him in his room, at night, and with nothing on but her

night-dress and flannel wrapper, would be worse than death. The mere thought made the girl's senses reel and sicken. She felt as if she were going to faint. Her breath came short and suffocatingly. Her eyes swam and darkened. Already the front door was opened, letting in a current of frosty air, which even penetrated to where she stood, when, before it closed, a Heaven-sent idea occurred to her. There were two cupboards in the room—a hanging one, and a dark, roomy place, with a sloping roof, and half filled with boxes. It was not likely Captain Pentreath would want to go to it. She doubted if he had ever done so; and while he was still wiping his boots on the door-mat, and lighting a candle at the hall gas, Hetty had crossed the room with one swift, silent spring, glided into the refuge aforementioned, and was crouching inside it, her body crushed against the door which opened inwardly; and her two hands pressed above her heart as if to still the frantic beating which seemed as if it must be audible throughout the house.

He was in the room now, but she was safe—safe, thank God! and the thought had not yet come to her how she was to get free again!

CHAPTER VIII.

MURDERED !

BREAKFAST was late at Guelder Lodge. It always was so when Mrs. Pentreath had been out at a whist-party the night before ; but when that lady came down to it, her face and manner were redolent of more than usual complacency. What wonder, either, when the day had opened with almost spring-like warmth. The sun was shining balmily ; there was no east wind, that surest ruffler of temper to all who have bones to ache and nerves to jar ; and, to crown all, she had not only won nine-and-sixpence the previous night to her own hand, but had once held three aces and the king of trumps in it at the same time.

Hetty was down before her, and presented rather a contrast to her hostess ; looking ill and languid, with dark shadows under her eyes, and no more colour in her pretty face than that shown by the ragged petals of the white chrysanthemums swaying in the wind outside ; but these signs were amply accounted for by her headache of yesterday ; and simply caused Mrs. Pentreath to give her a more kindly kiss, and address her in a gentler tone and manner than she had used for some time back towards her troublesome little *protégée*. Indeed, it would have been difficult to find a pleasanter or more peaceful-looking breakfast-table.

Outside, a turquoise sky and emerald lawn, the latter still sparkling in patches with the frost diamonds, which were fast melting in the mellow sunshine, save where the feathering deep-green boughs of cedars or deodars made strips of shade across the velvety turf; inside, a luxurious room, crowded with comforts and prettiness, and bright with a great glowing fire which blazed and sparkled on the steel and silver, on snowy cloth and dainty food, on Mrs. Pentreath's white hair and handsome features, and little Hetty, with her soft black curls, pale face and quaint woollen gown of some warm, dark-red material, cut short enough to show the tiny feet in their neat shoes and black silk stockings, and with deep ruffles of yellowish lace turned back from throat and wrist.

There was not much of what could be called conversation in the room, even after Hickson had finished his solemn ministering to the two ladies' meal, and had retired to his own regions. Mrs. Pentreath, indeed, talked rather volubly at first, narrating her card triumphs of the night before, and chuckling a little over them; and Hetty listened, and gave faint smiles of assent at intervals; but the girl was strangely wanting in her usual animation, and volunteered scarcely a word on her own account. In truth, she was partly occupied in debating within herself how to word her request for leave of absence, and whether she should wait to propound it till after Mr. Hamilton's visit or not. She felt sure he would come this morning. He had told her the day before that he should count the minutes till he saw her again, and if something had occurred to prevent his calling then, he would be

the more certain to do so early to-day. But then the question was, how she could manage to see him alone, so as to make that confession to him which was weighing on her heart, and—how he would receive it.

Somehow, she no longer felt half so happy or confident on this subject as she had done on the day previous. Suppose, after all, he did not trust her thoroughly? Suppose he were to say that a man must have some grounds for insulting a woman before he would dare to do so; or even that a woman who had been so insulted was scarcely fit to be a clergyman's wife; or suppose, though he did not *say* this, she could see the thought in that hard look which had frightened her once or twice before in his face—what should she, what could she do then? Nothing but let him go (for how, unless he had perfect confidence in her, could she hold him to her?) let him go, and then ask Mrs. Pentreath for an indefinite leave, and go away herself—away from her present pleasant home and the people who had been so kind and so cruel to her, and had made and marred the happiness of her life away—where she hardly knew, or how even to find those little-known kindred of her dead mother, if so be that one of them would take her in till she could seek out something to do for herself.

But this was a sombre prospect after all, one born of sleepless hours and overstrung nerves, and which she scarcely contemplated for a moment in reality. She might have done so if it had been the case that she had any guilt to confess, any wrong or doubtful doings of her own, for she had learnt by experience that the vicar could be both stern and jealous on occasion; and

though the knowledge had not made her love him less, it had mingled with her love a flavour of that wholesome awe, the absence of which in their wives it is the fashion of husbands nowadays to lament. As things were, however, it was Captain Pentreath's faults which were in question, not her own; and all she meant to tell him was that the young officer had forced his company on her on the way back from church, had been very rude to her, and had threatened to make mischief between her and her lover by showing the latter a photograph which he had stolen from her. She had it safe, and she would show it to him (for reasons of her own she felt an extreme repugnance to mentioning how she got it back, and was sure he would not hear it from anybody else), and she would explain about the writing on the other side, and then—or, better, first of all, perhaps—would beg him for her guardian's sake, and in remembrance of all her past kindness, not to let himself be provoked into quarrelling with his cousin, or——

Hush! there he was!

Breakfast was over, and Mrs. Pentreath had been called out to consult with the gardener about the cutting back of certain plants in the greenhouse; but Hetty was still sitting near the table absorbed in these reflections when a quick, well-known step on the gravel and sharp, decisive knock announced the visitor she was expecting, and almost before she could move he was in the room, having put aside the servant and entered unannounced.

Hetty sprang up, all her troubles banished by the first sound of his voice, and came to meet him.

"Oh, I am so glad!" she said, joyfully, and was putting out both hands to him when she stopped short, frightened by a look in his face she had never seen before. Stern it was, assuredly, sterner than she had ever seen it; but that was not all, for it was pale almost to ghastliness, and wearing an expression of pain and even agitation, so different from its usual frank, steady composure, that Hetty's hands fell again involuntarily, and she stepped back a little, asking: "Is anything the matter? I have been so wishing you would come to-day."

"And I should have come in any case, but are you alone—quite alone? There is something I want to say to you."

He had taken her hand and held it as he spoke; but his manner was preoccupied and unloverlike, and he did not kiss her. Hetty's nerves were the reverse of strong that morning, and she began to tremble. Was it possible after all that Captain Pentreath had been beforehand with her? But the vicar had felt the trembling of the little hand in his, and the stern abstraction of his face broke up into anxious concern.

"Why, what is the matter with *you*?" he said, quickly. "You look dreadfully ill. I never saw you so pale, and your eyes—Have you been crying? What is it? Great Heavens! has the news reached here first after all?"

"What news?" asked Hetty, bewildered in her turn. "I have not heard any."

But the quick impetuous questions, and the searching look which accompanied them, had confused her. Her foolish fingers trembled more than ever, and the

colour mounted into her face in such a vivid blush that it was little wonder if the keen eyes watching her did not deem her answer conclusive, and grew graver with displeased surprise. Perhaps it was because of this that his answer came so abruptly.

"The news which I received an hour back, and which I came here to ask your assistance in breaking to my aunt—that Ernest has been arrested on a charge of murder—murder of a brother-officer with whom he quarrelled yesterday evening, and who was found shot——"

"Shot!" If the bullet had passed through the girl's body she could not have sprung back with a sharper cry. "Shot—murdered! Oh, George, no; Was *that* what he meant? Oh, surely—surely, he couldn't——"

The vicar looked at her in great surprise.

"Could not mean what? What do *you* mean, Hetty? Is it possible you knew anything of this?"

Hetty went crimson all over in a moment.

"I? No, no, no; of course not," she stammered, heaping one negative on another in her embarrassment, though her lips were shaking so much they could hardly form the words. "I don't even understand what you are saying. Captain Pentreath murder anyone! Oh, it can't be possible. What would his mother say if she heard you?"

"Say, Hetty Mavors! Why that it is a lie."

Unseen by both, a third person had entered the room while they were speaking, a tall stately old lady, in black silk and with soft white hair framing a haughty handsome face. It was pitiful, the ghastly

change that came over it as she spoke, the words coming in hoarse laboured gasps:

"My son Ernest! George, how dare you! Tell me at once what this is. . . Some hoax. . . *My son*——" And there she broke off, and, before either could prevent it, staggered and fell heavily, like one stricken through the heart and dead.

It is easy to imagine the consternation of the two thus interrupted; and for the moment all thought of themselves, aye, even of Ernest Pentreath and the terrible tidings respecting him, were forgotten in the more terrible doubt as to whether the shock of those tidings had not in very truth brought death to the mother who gave him life. It looked like it. George Hamilton raised her carefully, and laid her on the sofa; and Hetty hung over her, chafing her hands, fanning her, and applying restoratives; but all seemed in vain, and by the time the lady's-maid had been summoned and Hickson sent off in hot haste for the doctor, the news had somehow leaked out (as bad news invariably will in the most reticent of households) that something dreadful had happened to "the captain." He had murdered somebody, or he had been murdered himself. Hickson held one story, and the cook the other; and he, or some other body, was in prison and going to be hung for shooting the other body; worst of all—and this was the only certain part of the whole matter—the shock of hearing about it had nearly killed his mother.

Nearly, but not quite. It was only a fainting fit, though an unusually severe one; and as Hetty knelt beside her, gazing on the marble features and watching

with streaming eyes the doctor's efforts at restoring consciousness, every memory of late unkindness faded out before the thought of all that she owed to the woman so sorely smitten ; and while she grieved from the depths of her innocent heart for having ever given her either trouble or annoyance on Captain Pentreath's account, she felt thankful at least that she had not added to it by complaining of the latter's conduct on the previous day.

By-and-by, however, Mrs. Pentreath began to revive. The eyelids fluttered, the lips lost their livid ashen hue, and after a time she was even able to look about her, and, true to herself, to force a faint smile on recognising the doctor, as she murmured :

"It is nothing—nothing at all ; some foolish joke. I hope they have not told you."

"Told me what ? That you tripped and fell over one of those stupid Persian rugs of yours ? Indeed they did then, and how often have I told you that I couldn't bear such mantraps in the house " said the doctor, cheerfully : all the more so indeed, that he had already extracted the true history of the seizure from the vicar, and was anxious above all things to prevent her own mind from recurring to it. He thought he had succeeded, for Mrs. Pentreath smiled again a little less feebly, and answered that they were not as safe as carpets. She must have the corners tacked down. The fact was (with a small forced laugh, more pitiful to those who saw it than any tears), she had been up very late dissipating the night before, and that always made her sleepy and stupid in the morning. If they would not think her very lazy, she should like a little nap.

But when the doctor had gone, declaring nothing could be better for her, all Mrs. Pentreath's assumption of playfulness and composure vanished in an instant. Her face seemed to become suddenly haggard and livid, like that of a woman of eighty, and she sat bolt upright, clutching Hetty's hands in hers so tightly that the girl almost cried out, as she bade her tell what there was to tell at once, or, better still, send for the vicar to do so. Was it all madness or a dream, that they had ventured to speak of Ernest in connection with a murder, or what—what had happened to him?

Alas for the poor mother! It was no dream; though all that George Hamilton could tell either her or Hetty were the bare facts he had learnt that morning from a telegram sent to him by Ernest's solicitor, and which ran as follows:

“Captain Pentreath arrested on charge of murder. Club quarrel last evening. Other man found shot two hours later. P. denies the charge. Break news to family.”

But as the day went on more tidings came in rapidly, and, despite all the efforts of the family to keep them a secret, became speedily known to the household in general, and even diffused about the neighbourhood, with every detail and amplification which the proneness of human nature to gossip and exaggeration could suggest.

Divested of these latter embellishments, however, the story, as even the heart-broken mother and the slender, shuddering girl who waited on her with a

daughter's sympathy, were forced to hear it, was as I shall briefly tell it below.

Captain Pentreath had arrived at his club about lunch-time on the previous day, and in a mood which was noticed even then as the reverse of amiable. Perhaps his irritability was increased by the fact that one or two men to whom he attempted to talk appeared too much engaged in their papers and magazines to be able to afford him anything but the briefest answers; while one or two others, known to be rather special chums of his in general, went out almost as soon as he made his appearance. Anyhow, he left the club himself, very soon afterwards, but returned again early in the same evening, and at a time when it happened to be rather full of men who had either dined there or dropped in immediately afterwards. Amongst the company was a middle-aged officer, just returned on sick leave from India, and who was known to belong to Captain Pentreath's late regiment there. Possibly for this reason several of the visitors drew on one side, as if to facilitate the meeting between the two, and it was observed that Pentreath looked very red and excited—some said embarrassed—as he went up to his old comrade and offered him his hand. Whether Major Hollis did refuse his altogether in return, or whether, as another version of the story went, he only gave the younger officer two fingers and then turned on his heel, was not clearly known, and is not material; but almost immediately afterwards high words were heard between the two men, Captain Pentreath accusing the new comer of slandering him and undermining his character; and Major Hollis retorting that a man who had caused

a married lady's name to become a common theme for club gossip of the most disrespectful nature, had no character to undermine, and further accusing him of having plumed himself on favours he had never received, or which, if he had received, would have been as disgraceful to himself as they were ruinous to the donor.

The quarrel grew so hot at last that several of the other gentlemen were obliged to interfere, and the antagonists were separated, but not until Captain Pentreath had told the Major that he should answer to him for his language, to which Major Hollis answered that he was perfectly ready to do so at any time, and could easily be found at his rooms, the address of which he mentioned.

A few minutes after this Captain Pentreath was persuaded to leave the club in company with one gentleman who appeared to stand by him; but he did so still in a violent rage, and even the hall-porter testified to the excited language used by the young officer as he passed through the vestibule, and his threats that he would be even with Hollis yet, and either make him apologise or shoot him like a dog.

This was all that was known of his doings at the time; while with regard to Major Hollis it was easily ascertained that he went home to his rooms in Albion Street less than half an hour after his antagonist's departure; that the little servant-maid there heard him let himself in, and came to the top of the kitchen stairs (her mistress being out at the theatre) to make sure that it was he; that she saw him standing on the doorstep, apparently in angry colloquy with another

man; and, being satisfied of his identity, went down-stairs again and to bed; that when there she was startled by a loud noise "like a bang," but being half-asleep paid no attention to it; and that it was left to her mistress on returning home, a couple of hours later, to find Major Hollis stretched across the hearth-rug in the front parlour with a bullet through his brain and stone dead.

This woman, for a wonder, showed presence of mind. Most of her class would, on receiving such a shock, have either executed a faint, which in the lower orders is apt to be a strangely noisy seizure; or have gone into hysterics, a still noisier proceeding requiring much brandy and all the attention from outsiders that ought to be paid to the injured party. Mrs. Jagers, however, was a sensible person, and neither did one nor the other; but within five minutes of ascertaining the state of affairs had roused the dazed and sleepy servant-girl and sent her off, first for a doctor—by good fortune there was one living only two or three doors off—and next for the gentleman whom poor Major Hollis had given her as his reference only three days before.

As it happened, this individual—also a military man—had but just walked home with a friend from the club, where they had been spending the evening over the whist-table, and, horror-stricken as both were at the girl's news, they lost not a moment in jumping into the cab which had brought her, and going off to Albion Street as fast as the driver would take them.

But now comes the most terrible part of the story to the Pentreaths—the damning part as regarded Ernest.

The cause which took Major Hollis's landlady into his room at all was this—she saw the parlour-window lighted up, and being in want of change for half-a-crown to pay her cabman with, knocked at the door to ask her lodger if he could oblige her with it. At first sight she thought the room was empty, and when a second glance showed her the body lying in a heap between the table and the fireplace, she only waited to ascertain that life was really extinct, and was rushing out to call in the cabman to assist her, when, as she afterwards deposed, she became aware of the presence of a stranger, previously unseen, in the passage, as also that his back was towards her, and that he was making for the door; that she prevented this by seizing hold of him and shrieking for help, till not only the cab-driver, but a couple of passers-by came to her assistance; that they all saw that the man, who was a gentleman, and made no resistance, was deadly white and shaking like a leaf; and that she then and there exclaimed:

“It's about my lodger—he's lying murdered in his room, and here's the man as done it. For the Lord's sake don't let him escape!”

That on this, one of the bystanders ran for a policeman, and one being brought, the man was handed over to him, despite his protestations of innocence and assertions that he had only entered the house behind the landlady, having come there to call on Major Hollis, and horrified by the sight that met his eyes, had lost his presence of mind, and staggered back into the passage; that he called on the cabman to corroborate the first part of his story, but that the latter declared himself unable to do so, having been too busy

looking in his vehicle to see if "the lady" had left anything behind her to notice who else went in or out of the door; and finally that Colonel Patterson, the deceased man's "reference," had no sooner entered the house and seen the prisoner, over whom the constable was then holding guard, than he started back, exclaiming:

"Pentreath! *Then it was you!* Good God! have you killed him?"

After which, and a few further words between the prisoner and the same gentleman, the former was taken off in custody to the nearest police-station and detained till the morning, when he was brought before the magistrate and committed to prison pending the coroner's inquest, bail being refused.

CHAPTER IX.

THE VICAR'S THEORY.

THIS, then, was the story of the accusation against Ernest Pentreath as it reached his family through Mr. Hamilton's lips on the evening of the day after his arrest.

It was a Wednesday, and the vicar had been in town all day, for the district coroner having been notified of the death, an inquest had been opened on poor Major Hollis's body, and Mr. Hamilton had, of course, been present at it; but on this first day the jury had not been got together in time to do more than view the corpse and take the deposition of the landlady as to the circumstances of her finding it; after which the proceedings were adjourned till Friday; and having only waited till this was settled, George made haste to return to Kew, knowing well the devouring anxiety with which the news he had to bring would be awaited there.

There was one item, however, to which I have purposely omitted to refer in the last chapter, an important one, seeing that it related to the weapon with which the murder, if murder it was, had been committed. No such weapon had been found on Captain Pentreath when he was arrested; but as an open pistol-case lay on the table with, not far from it

a pistol loaded in both barrels, and in such a position as to be within reach of Major Hollis's hand had he been standing upright, it was at least presumable that, instead of being a cowardly murder as was at first supposed, there had been a duel between the two gentlemen; and that the second pistol had been either flung away by the survivor in a fit of frenzy at the sight of his own deed, or hidden in a hasty and foolish attempt to conceal the same.

It was terrible for the poor mother to sit and listen to all this, longing the while to be with her son, to hear his own story from his own lips, and refute, if it might be, the accusation against him; yet unable to leave her couch owing to the nervous prostration which, following on that seizure of yesterday, had obliged her doctor to warn her that any fatigue or over-exertion during the next twenty-four hours would almost certainly be followed by severe illness.

"And I cannot be ill now, just when my boy is in trouble and wanting me. Oh yes, I will keep quiet. I must not risk being ill," she said; but all the same, quietness seemed of all things the furthest from her. She could not even lie back, but sat upright on the couch, her head and shoulders stooping forward, one hand nervously clenched round Hetty's, as though conscious of some sustaining sympathy in the warm touch of the soft young fingers; the other twisting and untwisting the fringe of the white cashmere shawl she wore round her shoulders, while she listened to the vicar's story and tried by a thousand pitiful interruptions and questions to suggest some exculpatory point, or extract some comforting assurance with regard to

the son who was both the one anxiety and idol of her life.

"I cannot understand it," she said more than once. "One might forgive their *suspecting* him. I suppose it is natural for people of that sort to suspect anyone who had the misfortune to be present at such a moment: but to put him in prison after they had heard his explanation, and even refuse him bail—a gentleman and a man of honour like Ernest!—it seems incredible."

"You forget the quarrel at the club just before, and the unfortunate threats Ernest used," George Hamilton answered, gently. "We must not blame them for suspecting him after those. The thing is to try and prove his innocence."

Mrs. Pentreath lifted her head with a little of her wonted haughtiness.

"It ought not to need much trying to do that. What does Ernest say himself? Yes, yes," interrupting herself, "I know what you have already told me about his only entering the house behind that horrid woman; but what took him there at all? What could have induced him to go there after the man insulting him as he had done?"

The vicar shook his head.

"That is one of the unfortunate parts of the matter," he said, "and I wouldn't tell you, but that you must hear it later. He owns, however, that though he left the club and came down here at the urgent entreaty of his friend, he was in too excited a state to either rest or remain in the house, but went back to town by the very next train, with the intention of calling on Major

Hollis, and extracting some sort of apology or retraction from him before he retired for the night."

Mrs. Pentreath wrung her hands in silent anguish. The natural question in sequence, "And what if either were refused?" was as present to her mind in all its terrible significance as to those of the other two. Before Mr. Hamilton could even say anything in consolation, however, another thought struck her, and she interrupted him, a puzzled look on her face.

"But you said he came down *here*. Did you mean to this house, or only to Kew? The former would be a mistake certainly, for he never came home at all that evening; and yet I can't understand his going anywhere else."

The vicar was looking puzzled too.

"Well, I certainly understood him to speak of this house; but I only saw him for a moment or two. Lorton, your old lawyer, sent me off to find that friend of Ernest's who sent the telegram; and I wanted to try and see the doctor as well before the inquest opened. I am going back now. I promised Lorton I would. There is a great deal to do, and I must get Ernest to give me every particular, but I had hoped that you would be able to show that he left here in a conciliatory spirit, and more bent on explaining matters with regard to Mrs. — than on provoking a worse quarrel. If you or Hetty could have testified to that much——"

He looked at the young girl as he spoke and stopped short, startled by the ghastly pallor of the face that met his, and which as his eyes rested on it was almost instantly succeeded by a burning crimson blush. Mrs.

Pentreath did not notice his pause, however; her own eyes had filled with tears.

"But we can't; how can we, when he was not here, and when, if he had been, we shouldn't have known it?" she said, piteously. "I was out at the Morrisons, you know; and Hetty had gone to bed hours before with a sick headache, and was fast asleep when I left; but I asked Hickson when he came for me with the carriage, if his master had returned, and he said no. I did so because Ernest had been called up to town by a telegram so early in the morning, that no one but Hickson saw him before leaving. I was in bed, indeed, and Hetty at church, so we did not even hear what the message was about, and I got nervous lest anything should be amiss. George, will it be too late for you to see him to-night, and ask him? Pray don't delay. There is some mistake, I am sure."

For a second the vicar did not answer. He was still looking fixedly at Hetty, but after that momentary meeting of their eyes hers had drooped, and while his aunt was speaking, the colour mounted higher and higher in her face, and she turned away her head as if unable to bear the scrutiny which, without looking up, she felt was upon her. George Hamilton averted his own eyes with a sigh, and rose up, taking his aunt's hand in a close, kindly pressure.

"Yes, there must be some mistake," he said, "but it will soon be cleared up; and you are right, I ought not to delay. Now, my dear good auntie, don't lose heart, or look so unhappy. Remember, it is far better you should be able to say nothing about him, than one word that could be used to his detriment."

"That would not be possible, George."

"It might be if you had seen him when he was in a passion and talking foolishly. Those hasty words at the club are the chief items against him now. It is one blessing in a sad business that neither you nor I can be called upon to bear witness to any others, and we must be thankful for it."

He bent down to kiss her as he spoke, and then, with a momentary hesitation—too slight indeed to be noticed—held out his hand to his young sweetheart who, crouched on a stool at her guardian's knee, with one trembling hand still clasping the invalid's chilly fingers, had hardly moved or spoken during the interview, and said:

"Good-bye, Hetty."

The girl started and looked up at him piteously.

All through this long, long day of excitement and suspense, she had been conscious of one strong desire, mounting even to sickness at times, to see her lover alone and exchange a dozen words with him, if no more; and it had not been possible. On his previous visit their brief *tête-à-tête* had been interrupted by Mrs. Pentreath's entrance and fainting-fit, and all thought of themselves had had to be banished in solicitude for her. She had hardly been able, indeed, to show signs of recovery before the vicar had had to hurry up to town to ascertain further particulars about the affair, as to which he then knew no more than was told him by the lawyer's telegram; and now he was going away again, and Hetty had not had a word, scarcely a look, that she could call her own.

It was more than she could bear. She wanted to

see him dreadfully. Not for any mere sentimental or selfish reason. Perhaps the poor child had never in her life felt freer from idea of love or lovemaking; but she wanted help, advice, guidance, and she had no one to give them. All day long Mrs. Pentreath had kept her at her side, and, nervous and weakened herself, seemed to cling to the girl as a stay. She would hardly suffer her out of her sight, and most of the time sat holding her hand, sometimes in silence, sometimes crying the quiet hopeless tears of later life; but oftenest talking of her son, of his merits, his weaknesses, of all he was to her, and of the wickedness of the accusations against him. Over and over again she said, "If they go on with it, if they make him out guilty, it will kill me—it is killing me now." Over and over again she appealed to Hetty for assurances that it was not likely he would be convicted, or any proof brought against him beyond the fact of his presence in the house; over and over again broke into railings against the unfortunate woman who was the original cause of her trouble, and the young officer, whose telegram announcing Major Hollis's arrival, and the way in which he had publicly denounced Ernest's version of his conquests abroad and of the reason for his return, had roused such hot anger and mortification in young Pentreath's breast.

"These vile military women! It is all their fault. Of course she ran after him, and people knew she did without *his* saying anything. As if Ernest would boast! It was noble of him to stoop to set himself right with a man who had so grossly insulted him, and to give him an opportunity to apologise; but there is

always so much of that natural nobility in Ernest, is there not, Hetty? And I am sure that is what he went there for, and so are you, child, are not you?"

Hetty felt at times as if her brain would turn, as if she could not stand the grasp of those cold white fingers, the hard pressure of the rings against her soft flesh, the feverish appealing eyes and mournful voice, pleading for assurances she knew not how to give.

She was agitated and unstrung, not only by the event that had crushed her companion, but by what had preceded it. She was quivering from a terrible experience, oppressed by a terrible knowledge. She knew not what to do about it; whether to give it words or hide it—as she was doing now—in her own bosom.

All the warmth and tenderness of her nature, a loving grateful nature, was strung up to intense sympathy with the woman who had been a mother to her in her orphanhood, who had protected and befriended her, and who now, broken down by sudden and unexpected affliction, clung to her as to a daughter. Yet all the while she had no sympathy for the cause of this affliction. The very thought of him made her shudder. The vision of him returning to the house, and of having to look in his face or touch his hand, sickened and revolted her. In her heart she firmly believed him to be guilty, guilty of a cowardly revengeful murder, the fit sequel to a cowardly, sensual life, and deserving of the worst punishment that the law could inflict. She did not wish that the law would inflict it; rather she prayed from the bottom of her soul that, for his mother's sake, he might escape; but her cheeks grew hot and her breath came thick and short, as she listened

to that mother's encomiums on him. She almost felt as if she should suffocate when the poor woman suffered herself, with a mother's natural injustice, to speak acrimoniously of the dead man who had dared to insult her son.

"But he was right, he did well to do so," Hetty thought with a girl's passionate disgust for things base and ignoble. "And does Mrs. Pentreath forget that *he* may have a mother too? George does not. I saw it in his face when she was speaking of poor Major Hollis. Oh, what would he say if he knew—— I wonder if I ought to tell him—if it would do good or harm!"

The question was in her mind when the vicar rose to depart—a question mingling strangely with a memory of a dark, airless closet full of old boxes and portmanteaux, whose sharp angles she could feel (though she could not see them) whenever she tried to move, of a cramped, unnatural position, and a great sickening dread that she should not be able to bear it, but should scream, or faint, or do anything to betray her presence; of trying to subdue this, and hold herself more firmly pressed against the door, and of hearing through that door the sound of a man pacing to and fro in the room without, and seeming to come nearer and nearer to her hiding-place with every restless step; of——

It was all in her mind, mingling with the question, distracting it, forcing it to her lips when the vicar rose to depart; and the sense that he was indeed going, that it must remain unanswered, that she should not see him for another day, and that then it might only be in the same manner, that others might question,

and she should not know how to answer, crushed her with a veritable sense of despair.

When he said "Good-bye, Hetty," in that grave, tender tone, which yet told her in some indefinable way that he was not satisfied with her, she could not even answer him for the sob which rose in her throat and choked her. She let him drop her hand and go; and then the door closed, and Mrs. Pentreath put up her hand to her head.

"My poor boy!" she said, sorrowfully, "if only I could go to him instead. Hetty, do you think——"

Hetty could bear it no longer. She sprang up, pulling away her hands.

"I am going—going to ask Mr. Hamilton what time he will come for you to-morrow," she said, breathlessly, and then she made her escape.

She had made up her mind. She would speak to him even if it were only for a moment.

The vicar was just letting himself out of the front-door when he heard her utter his name, and turning, saw her hurrying down the corridor to overtake him. Her hands were outstretched, and she was gasping for breath, so that her voice was hardly audible; but he stepped back gladly, and came to meet her, taking her into his arms in a close, sheltering embrace as he said:

"My darling, this is good of you! I thought I was not to speak to you at all; and it seemed rather hard, though my poor aunt's troubles makes one ashamed to think of anything else."

"Yes, it was about—about that I came," she answered quickly, for even in her hurry and agitation

she could not bear him to think her forward. It shocked her shy young maidenliness that she should seem to run after him now, often as she had done so in her more juvenile days; and yet how delicious the touch of that encircling arm was to her, and with what a strong and tender clasp it seemed to uphold her slight, trembling figure. "I wanted——Will you tell me what you think about all this?" she said a little breathlessly. "His mother of course believes him innocent; But *you*—do you think so, too?"

"I wish with all my heart I did," said the vicar "but unless he can get some witness to prove his assertion that he entered the house *after* the landlady, I do not see (the evidence on the other side is so terribly overwhelming) how anyone can do so. Not of course," as he felt the girl start and shiver, "that I think for one moment it should be called murder, or that any degree of passion could have made a man of honour, like Ernest, fire unfairly; but I believe that he followed Hollis to his rooms, that there was a duel, and that in his heat and excitement he pulled the trigger too soon! The worst part of it is his denying it."

"Why? Oh, do you think——"

"I think that, as there were no witnesses, if he were to own frankly to it and give all the details of his own accord, that though a jury would be obliged to bring it in manslaughter, they would take into consideration the intense aggravation of the insult he had received, the soldier's exaggerated sense of honour, and the other soldier's readiness to meet it, besides the fact that, though the pistol which did the deed has not yet been found, the remaining one and the case were both

proved to have belonged to Major Hollis; all of which might be made to show that Ernest did not come *prepared* to commit the deed with which he is charged, but was worked up to it by some repetition of the affront he had already received. To me this seems so clear that I can only hope that Ernest will be induced to drop his present story. He must see that no one believes it, and for my own part I feel only too thankful to hear his poor mother confirm what Hickson had already told me as to his not having been here that night, for if it had been so——”

“Well?” Hetty had been standing still, her hands clasped together, her face lifted to his, listening eagerly. When he paused for a second, she broke in in a quick, jarring voice. “If it had been?—What were you going to say? Go on, please. Do—do you mean that it would hurt him?”

The vicar looked down at her in some surprise. He could not see her face. The house was all in confusion, as houses are apt to be when the heads of them are in trouble; and Hickson had forgotten the hall gas. Only a faint red glow came through the open door of the dining-room, where a fire was burning, and touched the girl's white dress and the startled turn of her head.

“Of course it would hurt him,” he answered. “Think, a journey from town and back again takes time, and so also does an altercation or argument. He would not have had enough for both. Nay, if that part of his story were true he would barely have had time enough to go to Albion Street, make his way into the house, and shoot his victim then and there.”

“But—but the pistols?” She said the words almost

in a whisper, as if holding on to the plea the vicar had already put forward.

"In that case he must have brought one with him, or Major Hollis might have been cleaning his when interrupted: or—— But what is the good of discussing probabilities? I don't want to believe my own cousin a liar, but for his own sake I hope no one will be able to prove the contrary unless they are also able to testify that he was in a far milder and more conciliatory mood here than when he left the club; for if they couldn't do the latter they might——"

"What?"

"*Hang him!*" said the vicar, abruptly.

Hetty started back, a low sharp cry breaking from her lips. She put up her hand as if to silence him.

"Oh, don't, don't say such things," she stammered. "No one would. How could they? And there would be no need to ask them when Hickson and Mrs. Pen-treath can both swear that he wasn't here. Why, if anything happened to him it would kill her; she said so. But he is quite safe—quite—quite safe there."

She smiled a little as she said it, even though still shivering all over with agitation. The vicar could see the gleam of her pretty white teeth in the dim light. He did not understand this passionate emotion, this almost incoherent assertion of his cousin's safety. It recalled something else to him, and his brow darkened a little.

"I forgot to tell you," he said, suddenly, "that Ernest sent his love to you."

"To *me!*"

"Yes. He was very angry, perhaps not unnaturally,

at my not seeming to believe his story. He would hardly speak to me, indeed; but, as I went away, he called out: 'Give my love to little Hetty, and tell her not to fret for me.'

Hetty was speechless. It seemed to her as if someone she was trying to help had dealt her a mocking blow in the face, and the blood rushed up into it in a quick tide of outraged resentment. Only a moment back she had felt sorry for this man, anxious lest she might injure him by some imprudent word; and in the midst of his own danger, in the remorse he must have been feeling for his crime, he could yet find time to insult her, and through her lover, his rival.

"Oh!"—she said in a shaken, gasping tone, and then stopped short.

She was afraid of herself, of what she might be tempted to say, and there was no time for explanations, for thinking what to tell and what to leave untold. At that moment Mrs. Pentreath's voice could be heard calling from the library:

"Hetty! Hetty! where are you?"

The vicar started and went to the door, holding up his watch to the moonlight.

"I must go," he said, quickly. "It is later than I thought, and I may miss the train. Good-bye, Hetty!"

He put his arm round his betrothed and kissed her, but not as he had done before. In truth, he was feeling irritated and puzzled. Ernest's message, which had annoyed him at the moment, annoyed him more when he saw the disproportionate effect it produced, and, naturally, he did not understand the latter. Things he had for a while forgotten—the view from

the choir window of those two walking side by side along the frosty road ; Hetty's hurry to get rid of him a little while before, her insistence on their engagement being kept secret, and her unaccountable silence just now when she heard Mrs. Pentreath adduce what he knew to be a mistake—all these things came back to him in a rush, and he was a man who hated anything like deceit or double-dealing. As the girl put up her innocent lips to him, he held her face a little away, looking down on it in the faint white moonbeams with sudden sharpness, as he asked :

“That is all, then ? You have nothing else to say, nothing else you want to tell me before I go ?”

“Hetty !” Mrs. Pentreath called again, and then the library-bell rang.

Hetty pulled away her face with a quick nervous impulse. The moonbeams made it very pale.

“I ? Oh no, no, no ! I must go now, and so must you. You have stayed too long already. Oh, pray don't delay,” she said, hurriedly, and then wondered if she had offended him by her vehemence, and felt half inclined to run after him and say “Good-bye” again, he was gone so quickly and without another word.

Some shadow had fallen between them at the moment of parting, and dimly she recognised that Ernest Pentreath was at the bottom of it ; yet what could she have done ? It would have seemed to her beyond all things petty and revengeful to choose this moment, when he was in peril of his life, and needed all the aid friends or kindred could give him, to bring forward her own small wrongs and accusations against him. What did they matter, after all ? He could not

hurt her now, and some day, when he was out of danger, she would tell George everything.

She closed the door softly and went back into the house, glad and thankful she had not spoken.

CHAPTER X.

“A LIE WHICH IS HALF A TRUTH IS A HARDER MATTER
TO FIGHT.”

HETTY woke early the next morning. There was that sort of stir and unrest in the air which any latent excitement in a household seems to evoke. Servants ran about aimlessly; doors were banged or left open. There were continual rushes to the kitchen entrance, of three or four print-clad female figures with fluttering caps and eager faces agog for news. When Hetty came down, the first tidings which greeted her were that the second pistol had been found “down in the grate, wedged in behind one of the fire-brick cheeks and covered with ashes, like as if it had been thrown there on purpose to burn it up,” the housemaid said, all in a flutter of excitement at being first with the news; and indeed it was important, as Hetty felt, when she reflected on the stress George Hamilton had laid on the point of Ernest having gone to Albion Street unprovided with a weapon. If the pistol now found was shown to be the fellow of that already known to belong to Major Hollis, so much would have been proved in the prisoner’s favour; and in the hope of ascertaining that fact before going to Mrs. Pentreath, Hetty asked eagerly if the morning paper had arrived.

Yes, it had, and had been taken straight up to the

mistress, she was told ; and rather annoyed at the information, for fear of the effect any bit of bad news might have on the invalid, Hetty made haste to her room. There, however, she was met by a fresh disappointment. Mowcher, the maid, opened the door an inch only, and seeing who it was, said at once that Mrs. Pentreath was busy reading her letters, and did not require Miss Mavors. She had breakfasted already in bed, and begged Miss Mavors would take her own breakfast and go on with her usual occupations without troubling about her.

There was nothing in the message, nor in Mowcher's manner (which was always prim and formal), but it cast a chill over the girl all the same. Yesterday it was only her coaxing that had prevailed on Mrs. Pentreath to take food at all, and the latter had clung to her and kept her at her side as though deriving some comfort from her very presence. There had even been some talk of the girl sleeping in her room at night, and though Hetty had been glad when this was over-ruled on account of the mental and bodily fatigue from which she was already suffering, it gave her a keen sense of pleasure to feel that the old relations between them were renewed ; and that now in her day of trouble Mrs. Pentreath was willing to depend upon her for the sympathy and tenderness her young heart was so anxious to bestow.

Was some fresh pain in store for her, or was it only fancy that Mowcher's thin lips had a not displeased smile lurking behind their straight lines ? The girl went away silently and eat her breakfast by herself, starting at every sound, and with so little appetite that

even Hickson looked at her reproachfully when he came in to remove the things, and to observe, for Hetty's benefit, that there had been a telegram from Mr. Lorton, the solicitor, to say that he and Mr. Hamilton would be at the Lodge by ten o'clock; and that Mrs. Pentreath had ordered the carriage at half-past to drive into town.

Hetty was prepared for the second announcement. It had been arranged yesterday that if the widow were well enough she and her young companion were to go to town in the morning so as to be near Ernest, and get the earliest tidings of the finding of the inquest; and the girl had no sooner been reminded of it than she ran upstairs again to see if her guardian was fit for the journey, and if so, to help her to prepare for it.

Once again, however, Mowcher answered her knock, and after a moment's colloquy with someone within, said her mistress was better, and much obliged, but did not require Miss Mavors's assistance; and too hurt and mortified to say any more, or even to ask whether she should get ready herself, Hetty went away to her own room a prey to all manner of bewildering doubts and perplexities.

Did Mrs. Pentreath mean that she was *not* to go? But that could hardly be. Why, only last night they had talked it all over, and had decided to go to a private hotel in Clifford Street, and put up there for the night at any rate, or—till all was settled, which in other words meant till Ernest Pentreath was either set at liberty or committed for trial.

"We shan't want Mowcher. You will do anything I want for me, little Hetty," Mrs. Pentreath had

said; and if the carriage was ordered for half-past ten, Hetty felt that she ought to be ready for it.

After all, Mowcher, who was never very amiably disposed towards the young girl, might have altered the wording of the message; or Mrs. Pentreath might have received letters or papers which required her whole attention till the lawyer's arrival. It would show miserable smallness and huffiness on Hetty's part if she were not to get her things ready, because she had received what might never have been intended for a snub.

She got out her dressing things, therefore, and having put them up in a small hand-bag, was just changing her dress for one of black cashmere, which she thought would be more suitable for London wear, when there was a knock at the door, and Mowcher entered.

Hetty's hands dropped involuntarily. Somehow she guessed the woman's message before it was uttered, and blushed up all over her pretty face and neck a hot fiery red.

"If you please, miss," said Mowcher, turning away her eyes with an obtrusive assumption of not seeing what Hetty was doing, "my mistress sent me to tell you that she is going up to town this morning, but she will not need to trouble you to accompany her, so you can make your own engagements just as you please. She has ordered me to go with her instead," added Mowcher, primly.

Hetty looked at her.

"Very well," was all she said. She could not have added another word to save her life; but when the lady's-maid was gone she sat down, half-dressed as she

was, on the side of the bed, and burst into a very childish fit of weeping. What did it all mean?

There was an interruption soon. She had not heard any sound of arrivals; but one of the maids—not Mowcher—came to tell her that Mr. Lorton and Mr. Hamilton were in the drawing-room, and Mrs. Pentreath requested she would go there at once; and only waiting to complete her toilet as hurriedly as possible, Hetty went.

They were all three in the room when she entered. Mrs. Pentreath dressed for walking, and looking as stately as usual in her rich silk and furs; Mr. Lorton, an elderly, sharp-faced little man, whom Hetty already knew by sight, standing close to her; and the vicar some way off at a window. He came across the room and shook hands with her, but the lawyer only turned slightly and bowed, keeping his attention fixed the while on Mrs. Pentreath, who was speaking to him, and who went on with her sentence without any regard to Hetty's entrance.

"Yes, Mr. Lorton, my son has been foolish, and I own it. He has a host of good qualities, which I think even his enemies will admit; but among them he has one great fault: he is weak, sadly weak, where women are concerned; and being so, he lets himself be made a victim of by any forward, unscrupulous young woman who chooses to risk her reputation by throwing herself at his head in the endeavour to secure him as a lover or husband. I assure you I have seen the whole thing carried on under my own roof, and by people who owed everything to my bounty, and therefore I can easily imagine that in India——"

"My dear aunt," said the vicar, speaking rather hastily, "is not this beside the point? What we are discussing are Ernest's present difficulties, not his past ones, and the matter in hand now is how best to exonerate him from the suspicion which is resting upon him, and which, unless the coroner's inquest closes this evening with a verdict of 'suicide' or 'accidental death,' might ultimately land him in the felon's dock. His innocence, therefore, must if possible be made clear to-day, and as the duel theory must be given up——"

"But I thought you told me Mr. Lorton said——" Mrs. Pentreath was beginning rather piteously, when the lawyer interrupted her.

"That it was one which, if properly worked, might at any rate get him off with a comparatively light penalty? Certainly, madame, I did say so; but as Captain Pentreath persists in denying it altogether, and not only swears that he never so much as had a pistol in his hand, but adheres *in toto* to his original statement, we must of course accept that statement as the true one, and try our best to use it to his benefit. The other side will of course endeavour to do the contrary, and as their view of the case is that it was not merely a murder, but a treacherous and vindictive one, they will strain every nerve and call forward every witness in their power to prove it so. Now, Mr. Hamilton's desire and mine—in which, I must add, your son heartily concurs—is that you and—this young lady," he glanced slightly but observantly at Hetty, "should be spared the pain of being called as witnesses on either side. *He* could not do so; for he says him-

self that he believes neither you, nor any one else in this house, knew of his presence here; that he knew you and Miss Mavors had an engagement elsewhere that evening; and that, guessing from the large gates being open—that is a point, Mr. Hamilton, may prove an important one—that you had not returned, he let himself in with a latch-key and went straight to his own room; that, being too unhappy in his mind to rest, he only remained there for ten minutes or so; and that as he departed without seeing any one, or disturbing anything in the house, you could have no means of telling that he had been in it. Now, is this statement correct as regards you?”

“Quite,” said Mrs. Pentreath. “I was out as he says, and had no idea till yesterday evening, when my nephew told me so, that Ernest had been near the house in my absence. With regard to Miss Mavors, however, she was not with me; and Mr. Hamilton has probably repeated to you what I stated to him yesterday—I may add, in her presence, and without her contradicting me—that she was in bed and asleep. All that I know of my own knowledge, however, is that I left her in bed and *apparently* asleep at eight o’clock, and that on returning home at a quarter to eleven, which must have been a very few minutes after my son left, my maid, whom I sent to enquire for her, found her in the same condition. Miss Mavors is here, however, and you can question her for yourself. It is quite possible that she may know more of my son’s movements than I do, and on the evening in question may have expected him to return, and risen to receive him. I should not like for her own sake, to suppose

that it was so, but I say it because on a previous occasion——”

“Aunt Julia, this is wrong and cruel,” cried the vicar, indignantly, “and you have no right to say it at all. You would not do so if you were not upset and over-excited by all this miserable business ; and I hope Mr. Lorton will understand that, and will not dream of insulting Miss Mavors by any such questions as you suggest.”

“Well, Mr. Hamilton, I should be sorry to insult anybody,” said the old lawyer, equably. He was used to family quarrels, feminine ones especially ; “and as Captain Pentreath himself is still under the impression that Miss Mavors was out with his mother, it is evident he did not see her, and there is no reason for anyone to suppose that she was not in bed and asleep ; unless indeed,” with a swift side-glance at the girl, “she should wish to contradict that supposition or make any statement of her own accord.”

Hetty turned her head slowly and looked at him. Since entering the room she had not sat down or spoken, but had remained standing by a small table near the door, with one small hand resting on it as if for support, and her face, from which every vestige of colour had fled before the first words Mrs. Pentreath was uttering, turned towards that lady. She perfectly understood everyone of those words. She felt their application to herself and the scorching insult conveyed in them as keenly and thoroughly as her worst enemy could have desired. She knew now that Mowcher or Hickson (it mattered little who) had told her guardian about her having been out with Captain Pentreath on the

morning before the duel ; and she knew, too, how the fact, even by itself, but still more with the addition of her guarded silence respecting it (and who knew what else might have been said respecting her?), must tell against her character for integrity in that guardian's eyes. She could read the outraged trust and confidence, the utter contempt for what must seem a callous and vulgar deception flashing in every line of the handsome, haggard face in which pain and anxiety had worn such deep and piteous lines, even in the last twenty-four hours. She felt it all, and knew that she was judged and condemned unheard, that nothing she could say in her defence—if, indeed, she could stoop to defend herself before a quasi-stranger like that little sharp-eyed lawyer—would have any effect beyond that of rousing fresh anger and incredulity in the woman before her. She realised that between them all was over ; that even her lover, while standing up in her defence, did so more from a manly sense of honour and chivalry than from his own confidence in her ; and with all this she felt no indignation, none of the quick, passionate wrath which a few weeks back would have stung her to quick denial and recrimination. All that seemed gone from her, everything but a sense of utter impotent despair, the despair of a child who wonders vaguely at the cruelty which is wreaked on it, yet knows not how to complain or defend itself. Her fair innocent face grew whiter and whiter, and her eyes large with a blank, pitiful stare which looked like nothing but a tacit acknowledgment of guilt to her indignant patroness. Even the one red spot which had risen in either cheek when the vicar spoke had faded

away again before she turned in answer to Mr. Lorton's query, and said, speaking very low but distinctly:

"Certainly not. I have no wish to contradict you, and I have no statement to make of any sort."

It was curious, but the sound of her own voice seemed to rouse her. She had no sooner spoken than she was conscious of a feeling of pleasure in having done so, and a determination to maintain her secret now at all hazards.

"Thank you," said Mr. Lorton, quietly: "then I may take it for granted that you were asleep, as supposed, at the time mentioned?"

"Certainly."

"And in that case, whether Captain Pentreath was here or not, you could not have seen him?"

"No; I never saw him that night at all."

It was easier than she thought, and her eyes met Mrs. Pentreath's, bravely.

"I must ask you one or two more questions, however. I have already asked them of the servants. Your room is, I believe, at some distance from the hall. Could you, if you had been awake, have heard anyone enter at the front door?"

"No. I did not hear you arrive to-day, though I was listening for you."

"And your windows do not look out upon the front—so that, supposing again that you had been awake—you could not have seen anyone approach the house by that way?"

"I could not. It would be quite impossible."

"Thank you once more. Mrs. Pentreath, time is pressing, and the carriage is ready, I see. If you will

kindly let Mr. Hamilton put you into it at once, I will just make your man take me into his master's room again, and then we will start without more delay."

The lawyer left the room as he spoke, and Mrs. Pentreath rose at once. Hetty had felt rather than seen the sigh of relief which had passed over the widow's pale and rigid lips while she was giving her answers—answers given in defence of her own honour, not of Ernest's innocence. She seemed to care nothing about that now; but her courage had come back, and as Mr. Lorton left the room, she turned to her benefactress in a last appeal:

"Mrs. Pentreath, you are not going yet; you will not go without even speaking to me!" she said, coming forward and putting out her pretty hands in a childish, eager way, while the colour flushed to her face. "You are angry and offended with me, or you would not say what you have done; but you had no cause to do so. I have done nothing wrong—nothing, and if you will only wait and let me tell you——"

"Thank you, but I do not wish you to tell me anything," said Mrs. Pentreath, coldly. "Others have done so—others who have no interest in lying to or deceiving a too——"

"Aunt Julia!" cried the vicar.

"George, I beg—I desire you will be silent. You may be a clergyman; but I am your aunt, and this is my house, and I will speak to my ward as I think fit and right whilst she is in it. She has deceived me, and has taught my son to do the same; even making use of a pretended love of religion to trick me, so that now—*now* when I would give all the world to be able

to depend on and assert his innocence against the whole world, I—God help me!—I, his own mother, know not what to think. No, Hetty!” turning on the girl with sudden fire, as, frightened by the anguish in her last utterance, the poor little creature tried to utter some word of remonstrance, “do not speak to me. Whatever you might say now I should disbelieve. George, give me your arm, please. Mr. Lorton is calling, and we cannot delay.”

But when the vicar had put her in the carriage he came back for a moment.

“Hetty,” he said, taking the girl’s hand quickly in both his, “this is terrible—for you and for me; but my aunt is beside herself with grief and anxiety, and she has been deeply wounded. Child, you must know that she has loved you. Why were you not more frank with her?”

“Frank! About what? Oh, you don’t think——” Hetty was beginning when he checked her.

“Hush! It is no thinking. You don’t know it; but I saw you walking with Pentreath that morning when you would not let me accompany you; and Mowcher has told her mistress that the evening before she was in the inner drawing-room and overheard—— But I can’t wait now. Ernest’s fate is more important even than this; and I will see you again before night. Only remember this *cannot* go on. I have only borne it to-day on account of my promise to you; but that must be broken now——”

“Yes, that must be broken now, of course,” Hetty interrupted him. She pushed him gently away, pointing to the door where Hickson had just appeared

to summon him. "Go," she said, with a strangely woful smile on her pale face, a smile which never touched the depths of despair in the dark, misty eyes. "They are waiting for you, and I—I can take care of myself. Do not trouble about me;" and then as he let go her hand and went, for, chafe as he might at the necessity, he knew that in truth every moment was of importance, she turned and walked very slowly and deliberately to the window. The carriage was just driving away. Mrs. Pentreath had sunk back in the seat as though already exhausted by the effort she had made; and Mr. Hamilton was bending over her, wrapping the rug more closely round her knees. He seemed to be thinking of nothing else, to have forgotten Hetty altogether. The girl stood there gazing, gazing, gazing with bright distended eyes till the last glimpse of the carriage and its occupants had disappeared in a cloud of dust. She did not move even then. It was a cold raw day. Big black clouds with ragged, wind-torn edges were scudding across a pale ash-grey sky. A bleak north-east wind swept the tall trees downwards, and tore the last brown leaves from their boughs, to send them whirling over the lawn in a weird and ghastly dance. High over head a flight of birds drove by with a long wailing cry. Then the gardener's boy ran out and shut the great iron gates. The loud jarring clash smote on Hetty as if it were a knell, the death-toll of her separation from all that were near and dear to her. She put up her hands to her head with a sudden sharp cry, and fell upon her knees weeping bitterly.

* * * * *

All the rest of that day passed like a long feverish dream, in which Hetty crouched over the fire, sometimes crying, but generally thinking, wondering, debating, going over and over again the double round—what was happening in town, and what would happen to her? Now and then a servant came in to attend to the fire, bring her food, which she could not touch, or scraps of news which she swallowed greedily, only, perhaps, to hear them contradicted next moment. The under-housemaid, who admired Captain Pentreath greatly herself, and believed Hetty to do the same, was particularly zealous in bringing her every scrap of gossip she could collect, and even made bold to express an opinion that it was “downright *crule* to have left her behind that way, and she wondered missis would demean herself to harken to that there Mowcher, a mean prying thing, a listening about at droring-room doors when ladies and gentlemen were talking inside.” But though Hetty heard her so far as to take in that Mowcher must have played eavesdropper to Captain Pentreath’s interrupted confidences that evening before dinner, and had kept them to make capital of later on, she never moved or answered except by a faint smile or shake of the head. And so the day dragged on, and evening fell dark and thick with a drizzling rain, which pattered on the window like falling tears. One of the maids came in then to light the lamps, but Hetty begged to be left in the firelight, and when dinner was announced she only shook her head, and said pitifully that she could not eat, she was not hungry.

“But, oh, miss, you’ll be ill. You’ve not eaten a

mossel this day," the maid said, reproachfully, and then started and ran off, saying there was a ring at the bell, while Hetty sprang to her feet, roused in a sudden from her trance of wretchedness, and gazing eagerly at the door.

Was it George Hamilton? He had said that he would see her again that evening. Perhaps he did believe in her after all, and was coming to tell her so; or perhaps Captain Pentreath had been set free, and in gratitude for his own escape had had the honesty to clear her. She tried to think of him and not of herself. It seemed horrible to her, when it was a question of life or death for this man, however vile he might be, that she could be thinking only of her own selfish troubles and interests. But, oh, why did not someone come to her? She could hear a great scurrying to and fro, and servants' voices raised high in a clamour of tongues, something like a scream; and then at last the door opened a little, and she started forward to see—Hickson standing respectfully in the entrance! He was still in his great-coat, all spotted and shiny with rain, and his face was so pale that Hetty forgot everything but the news which she saw he had come to bring.

"Oh," she said, trembling, "is—is it over?" and then her voice broke. Hickson came forward. There were one or two of the other servants clustering behind him.

"Yes, miss," he answered, "it's over, the inquest that is, and Mr. Hamilton sent me out to tell you. He couldn't leave Mrs. Pentreath, she was too ill. They—they've brought it in 'wilful murder' against the captain, miss."

“*Murder!* Hickson, they could not! Do you mean it?” The girl’s voice sounded like a cry. Somehow, often as she had said the word to herself, she had never realised it before till she heard it so spoken. Hickson was nearly crying too. He had known “the captain” since he was a bright, saucy boy.

“Yes, miss,” he said, “and it was all on account of that there latch-key! If he’d only knocked or rung so that someone could have let him in, and so been able to prove that he was here at the time he said, it would ha’ saved him.”

“But—but I thought——” Hetty stopped and put her hand to her head. What was it the vicar had said on the previous day? “If anyone were to prove he came to this house before going to Major Hollis and in the same mood as when he left the club, it might hang him.” Hickson looked at her compassionately.

“Yes, miss, but you see they made a point at the inquest of something which none of us had thought of. Everyone seems to have took for granted, you see, miss, that the deceased gent *had only just been murdered afore the landlady got home*. Indeed she swore as the body was still warm when she found it, but when the two doctors, as were called in, came to give their evidence to-day they both proved quite clear and positive as life had been gone out of the poor gentleman *over an hour* at the very least before he was found; so if anyone could be brought to bear witness that the captain was here at that time, that would settle the case as far as he is concerned. Even his worst enemies couldn’t make him out to be in two

places at onst; so it's just a question of time, what they call an *alibi*, you see, miss.”

But Hetty did not see; not at that moment. Her mind had grasped the position before Hickson's slow speech had finished giving it utterance, and before the full view of it and of all that it involved, her strength broke down all at once. She tried to say, “But he *was* here—I know it,” but something seemed to snap in her brain, a black cloud swooped suddenly down between her and Hickson, and for the first time in her life little Hetty fainted away.

CHAPTER XI.

COMMITTED FOR TRIAL.

“**E**NGAGED to her? *You!* George, I don’t believe it.”

“And yet it is quite true, my dear aunt. Should I be likely to say it otherwise?”

“But when?”

“Less than a week ago, and I heartily wish you had known it at the time. Why I tell you now, when you are in so much trouble about your own affairs, is simply on account of the very erroneous impression you are under respecting her, an impression which is quite as offensive to me as it is cruel and unjust to that poor child, and which is making you treat her as an enemy, and shut her from your confidence, just when you most need her love and sympathy.”

It was breakfast time, and a very comfortable breakfast had been laid for Mrs. Pentreath and her nephew in a private sitting-room at Almond’s Hotel; but though the vicar brought a little table to his aunt’s side, and heaped it up with all the choicest portions he could select, to tempt her appetite; pouring out her coffee, and adding cream and sugar with all that anxious, tender awkwardness which in a strong, manly man has something so lovable in it, Mrs. Pentreath only smiled sadly in recognition of what he was doing,

and then leant back in the large armchair where she was sitting, and covered her eyes with her hand, to hide the slow painful tears which would steal from under the closed lids, do what she could to restrain them.

The last two days of suspense and anguish seemed to have aged her all of a sudden, and turned her into an old woman, robbing hair and eyes of the brightness they had always hitherto retained, and bending the stately head and shoulders with a weight heavier than a dozen extra years could have laid upon them.

It pained the vicar inexpressibly to see how shaken and feeble she looked. He had not expected to see her so utterly crushed by the conclusion of the inquest, a conclusion for which he himself had not been unprepared; and which, as he reminded her, need not necessarily affect that of the magisterial enquiry, and fearing that she was going to be taken seriously ill, he entreated her to return home before the latter began, and let him bring or telegraph her the result as soon as it was decided; or, if she would not do that, to allow him to send for Hetty to be with her. Mrs. Pentreath, however, repudiated the latter proposal quite as indignantly as the first, and with an amount of scorn at the mention of the girl's name, which provoked the vicar to anger on his side, and made him betray the secret which only his promise to Hetty had induced him to keep so long.

Yesterday he himself had been feeling puzzled and irritated with regard to his betrothed; and Mowcher's information, embellished with all a *femme de chambre's* normal inaccuracy, had coincided too

unpleasantly with the testimony of his own eyes and ears not to make him sufficiently uneasy and suspicious to be desirous of a very speedy explanation and clearing up of the matters in question.

This satisfaction, however, the exigencies of Ernest's situation had as yet denied him; and he had been obliged to return to town with his aunt, haunted all the way up by the vision of a pure, child-like face too shocked and sorrowful in its innocent dismay to make the insinuations levelled against it seem anything but grossly unjust and absurd even to a jealous man's promptings; and filling him with a longing to go back then and there that he might take the poor forlorn little figure to his heart, and try by the tenderest caresses, the heartiest assurances of his own faith and confidence, to bring back the light and colour to those white cheeks, those wistful despairing eyes.

It was a vision which came back to him again and again through the long watches of the night, knocking at his window with every gust of wind that rattled at the sashes, and wailed along the deserted street, weeping and sobbing in the rain which pattered against the panes with dreary persistency all the livelong night, stretching out soft appealing hands to him in every one of the brief snatches of slumber which, at long intervals, relieved the wakeful hours.

Try as he might to think of the more momentous issues in hand, it was Hetty, Hetty only, Hetty always, who filled his mind, and but for his sincere affection for his widowed aunt, and the absolute duty that he felt it to attend to her, and her only, at the present time, nothing would have prevented him from going

down to Kew by the earliest available train in the morning. As it was, he felt it impossible to listen to a repetition of those strictures against the absent girl which had seemed so unendurable when uttered in her presence, and his indignation took the form of an abrupt announcement of his engagement to her.

Rather to his surprise the very shock of the news seemed to do Mrs. Pentreath good. For the first time that morning she sat upright, and a faint tinge of colour came into her wan face.

"I can't take it in," she said, putting her hand rather hazily to her forehead. "*Hetty engaged to you!* but I thought you didn't care for her?"

"Then you must have been very blind, Aunt Julia, since I began to care for her when she was a mere child and have done so ever since."

"Well, so I once thought, but of late—ever since Ernest came, in fact—you seemed to change. You hardly ever came to the house; and she and Ernest were always together. I thought——"

"Yes, I know," said the vicar, impatiently, "and so did I. I saw he admired her; and I thought I had no chance against a fellow who was younger, better looking, and better calculated to please most girls' fancies; so I acted like a jealous fool, kept out of the way, and made myself so disagreeable that the wonder is she didn't take a thorough dislike to me."

"But, George, why didn't you tell me?"

"Well, first because I didn't believe I had any hope; and then, because after I had found out my mistake, and that the dear little girl did care for me after all, she wouldn't let me speak. No, don't blame her. It

was natural enough, though it seems horridly cruel to say so to you now; but the scorn with which you had treated her, and the way in which her girlish kindness and friendship for your son had been misconstrued, wounded her more than you perhaps realise, and had taught her to distrust both your justice and affection where she was concerned. She had grown afraid of you, in fact, and I was foolish enough to give in to her fear, and to agree to our engagement being a secret for a few days. I am sorry for it now."

"And I am sorry, too. Why, George, it used to be my great desire that this should be so. Nothing would more have pleased me; but, are you sure, even now?"

"Sure of what?"

"That she does care for you? I should be only too thankful to believe it; but if so, why should she scheme to get walks in secret with my boy, and pretend to have been at church?"

"It was not a pretence. I saw her at church, and spoke to her after the service. Indeed I wanted to walk home with her myself, only she wouldn't let me."

"And then she met Ernest by arrangement, and walked with him. George, I don't want to hurt you; but after what Mowcher told us, and even Hickson's remark as to the state of agitation they were both in when they returned, does it not look bad?"

"No, it does not." The vicar spoke with rather angry doggedness. "Why should you assume they met by arrangement or design on her part at any rate; or take it for granted that, because some scraps of conversation were repeated to you, they must be correct

in substance and form? *Servants!* Do you think I would listen to the vulgar tittle-tattle of a servant against my future wife, if you would against your son? But there, aunt," checking himself suddenly, as he saw the widow start and flinch nervously, "I didn't mean to reproach you, and you must forgive me if I seemed to do so, only, you see, I love that little girl. I helped to form her mind. I've watched her grow up from child to woman, and knowing how pure and true and tender every instinct of her nature has always proved itself to be in the past, I cannot hear her condemned without appeal, and on the mere authority of the servants'-hall, for a piece of vulgar, undignified deception of which no girl with common maidenly honesty would be guilty. I grant you the thing seems mysterious, and I myself don't yet see the explanation of it; but there is only one person whom I will ask for that explanation, and that is Hetty herself, and whatever she tells me I will believe."

Mrs. Pentreath looked up at him wonderingly. In her heart I think she was feeling rather ashamed of herself, and certainly she had never respected her nephew more than when he stood over her and lectured her thus sharply on her duty to her old sweetheart's daughter. In memory she seemed to see poor Jack Mavors on his death-bed, with his bright hollow eyes fixed imploringly on her as he commended his little daughter to her motherly care, and the tears rose thickly in her own as she said, turning her head away:

"Well, well, don't scold me, George: I may have been wrong, and it is your affair more than mine at

present; but even you say it is mysterious, and there are so many mysteries just now. Oh, my dear, I am a selfish woman, but I can't think of more than one thing at present, or let you do so either. You may think Ernest to blame in this. Perhaps he is; but he is your cousin, he has no father or brother, no one but his poor mother to stand by him; and oh, George, while it is a question of life or death, or, worse than death, life-long disgrace and punishment for him, don't, pray don't, let us waste our time on other matters."

She was weeping unrestrainedly now, and George Hamilton was fain to do his best to soothe and comfort her, hating himself all the while for his own clumsiness in the task, and wishing more than ever for Hetty who would have done it so much better.

Breakfast at the hotel had been very early that morning, as the magistrate's enquiry was to open at ten; and Mrs. Pentreath was determined, even if not required as a witness, to be present at it; but when Mr. Lorton arrived to escort her and the vicar to the Marylebone Police Court, it was found quite impossible for her to go. Mowcher brought her bonnet and cloak indeed, and dressed her in them; but directly she attempted to stand on her feet she was seized with trembling and faintness; and after some delay it had to be decided, on the doctor's authority, that she was unfit for the effort and must stay behind.

The vicar was glad afterwards that it had been so settled; for although it seemed cruel to leave her at the hotel under no better care than a chambermaid's, (Mowcher as well as Hickson having been called as witnesses by the other side) he felt before long that to

have been present at the hearing of the case would have been terribly trying to her.

For it went against the prisoner in a way for which even the finding of the coroner's inquest had not prepared him. Mr. Lorton, indeed, had rather pooh-poohed that, speaking of the jury as a set of ignorant, fat-brained, little shopkeepers, knowing nothing of law; and whose decision was more likely to be overruled than confirmed by that of an intelligent magistrate, a man likely to have some acquaintance with military honour and social life in the upper classes; while Ernest himself had so completely upheld a similar view, and carried himself with such careless defiance during the brief interview he was allowed to hold with his family after the inquest was over, that both his mother and Mr. Hamilton felt their own misgivings rebuked by the sight of his cheerfulness and confidence.

But all this was quite altered to-day; and as moment by moment the case against Captain Pentreath grew darker and more convincing, George Hamilton's heart sank lower and lower, and even the prisoner himself lost the air of proud, well-bred composure which hitherto he had so successfully maintained, and leant forward in the dock with haggard face and feverish eyes, and restless gnawing at the heavy moustache which covered his trembling lips, as one witness after another appeared in corroboration of the charge against him, while on his own side there was little to bring forward but his own testimony and that of the doctor; and on this latter, which went to show that there was nothing in the direction of the wounds or the place in which the pistol was found to contradict the theory

for the defence that the former were self-inflicted, Mr. Lorton laid so much stress as to show he felt the weakness of the other parts of his case.

This was all he could do, however; and unless accepted as confirmatory of the prisoner's evidence, it rather told against him in the minds of the public; for although the doctor was willing to admit so much, he would not say that it was in any way impossible for the shot which killed Major Hollis to have been fired by someone else; only that in the latter case the person in question must have either fired from a sitting position, or holding the pistol intentionally low in order to enable the bullet to take effect in an upward direction as it had done; and this was immediately taken advantage of by the other side to show the unfairness with which the duel had been conducted, and by which Major Hollis had been taken at a disadvantage and killed before he had had time to fire, if indeed he intended doing so, in his own defence.

And of witnesses to Captain Pentreath's own story there were positively none. The cabman, indeed, who drove Major Hollis from the club had been found, and had been identified by the servant girl as "the man" who had been disputing with her mistress's lodger on the doorstep; thus disposing of the supposition that the individual in question was Captain Pentreath, but the ticket-collector at Kew Gardens Station, who was called upon to bear witness to having taken the young officer's ticket on the evening of the fatal occurrence, failed both in examination and cross-examination to identify him with any degree of certainty, and when pressed would only remember noticing a "tall, military-

looking gent in a light coat, *something like* the prisoner," and declined altogether to swear that the latter was the same person. Two other points in Captain Pentreath's statement were, it is true, corroborated, one by Hickson as to the iron-gates being open at the time at which Ernest declared he had found them so; and the other by the ticket-clerk at Kew, as to a large number of persons who had been at some public entertainment in the place, having left by the 10.44 train at the same time as he did. But both these points, which seemed so conclusive to the prisoner's own family and friends, were made very little of at the enquiry, where it was shown that the entertainment in question (a Shakesperian reading for a charity) had been advertised in Kew for ten days beforehand, with the hours at which it would begin and finish; and as the train named was the next after the conclusion of the affair, it was easy for Captain Pentreath, who must have seen the advertisement a score of times, to guess that a large number of the audience who lived at a little distance down the line would be pretty sure to leave by that train and no other; while even Hickson was forced, under pressure, to admit that the whist-party which had taken Mrs. Pentreath out was a regular weekly institution, and as the gates were always kept open between the time of her leaving the house and returning to it, it did not need her son to be a conjuror to tell almost to a minute the exact time at which they would be found in either condition. As Hickson nearly wept while this was being dragged out of him it was made all the more telling, and as it had become evident some time before that the case was one

which must inevitably go before a jury, even the vicar, and still less Mr. Lorton, were surprised when the latter's appeal for a remand was refused by the presiding magistrate on the ground that there was not sufficient cause for one.

By five o'clock that afternoon Ernest Pentreath had been formally committed to Newgate to await his trial at the next sitting of the Central Criminal Court, and his lawyer was saying to George Hamilton :

"My dear sir, I never expected anything else for a single moment, and now, as there are only three weeks to the next sessions, and Captain Pentreath's one chance of escape is an *alibi* strong enough to upset all this damning weight of evidence against him, what we have got to do is to hunt up everything in the shape of a witness for it that we can find between now and then : and, by Jove ! it's a task that we must spare neither time, trouble, nor expense over."

It was a sad journey back to Kew on the following day. Mrs. Pentreath, indeed, had borne the blow better than could have been expected. Emotion had worn itself out in the excitement and suspense of the last few days, and when the final down-stroke came she received it with a sorrowful, pathetic dignity that surprised everybody.

"I know that my son is innocent," she said, "and I believe that sooner or later his innocence will be shown to the world ; but I knew, too, that his enemies would do their best to make him out guilty. I felt from the beginning that we had no chance against them ; but it was not that which crushed me then ; it was the doubt which even I, his mother, felt as to whether he might

not have been tempted to call out and shoot the man who had so foully insulted him. If it had been so it would have killed me, but now that I have his own word to the contrary, I can afford to wait a few weeks for those who do not know him as I do to be convinced of the same. It is impossible that during that time some one among the many who must have seen and passed him on the way between Kew and Albion Street should not come forward to testify to it."

But, with all this courage and resignation on the mother's part, and with all the cheering predictions with which George Hamilton strove, even against his own convictions, to sustain and strengthen her, the journey home was a very sad one, and as they drove in at the big gates, and came in sight of the house, every window of which seemed flashing with some memory of Captain Pentreath's handsome face and figure, his mother turned so pale that the vicar feared she was going to faint then and there, and wished more than ever that he could see her safely in bed and under Hetty's loving care and tendance.

Some reflection of the latter thought must have crossed his aunt's mind, for she turned her sad eyes on him with a look meant to be kind as she said :

"Hetty will be looking out for us, I dare say. Does she know, George? I—I almost wished I had had her with me yesterday."

The vicar took her hand in his and pressed it gratefully, but there was no time for him to answer. They were just driving up to the door, and two of the maids had got it open, and were standing at it before Hickson had even had time to descend from the box and ring.

Mr. Hamilton sprang out, casting a keen glance round for his betrothed. More keenly than Mrs. Pen-treath he realized in what manner she had been left ; but he had telegraphed the sorrowful ending to the enquiry the evening before, addressing the telegram to her, and in his heart he felt sure that now in the hour of her guardian's humiliation neither pride, timidity, nor wounded feeling would keep the girl from her side.

It gave him a sharp pang, therefore, to see no sign of her sweet sympathetic face, and ere he turned back to help his aunt from the carriage, he asked, sharply :

"Where is Miss Mavors ? Does she know we have come back ?"

There was a moment's hesitation : and the maid addressed turned pale and looked with rather a frightened glance from the vicar to her mistress, who was standing just within the hall with head bent wearily, and one hand resting on her nephew's arm, while poor Hickson (whose demeanour ever since his unlucky evidence had been that of a self-condemned Iscariot) lifted almost reverentially from her shoulders the heavy furred cloak she had worn in the carriage. Outside there was a pale blue sky, crossed with drifting masses of purplish-grey clouds, and a high cold wind sweeping the dead leaves into heaps, drying the sopped gravel, and shaking showers of glittering drops from the ivy over the porch. It seemed a relief to the girl when Mr. Hamilton repeated the question, adding, as a new fear struck him :

"She—she is not ill, is she ?"

"Ill ? Oh no, sir," said the housemaid, quickly.

“Not that I’ve heard, at least; but I thought the mistress would know—Miss Mavors isn’t here, sir.”

“*Not here!* Why where is she, then?”

“I don’t know, sir. We thought she was with mistress. She went away yesterday morning. We don’t know where she is.”

CHAPTER XII.

THE SALVATION CAPTAIN—JANE !

IT was late on the day of Captain Pentreath's examination before the magistrates. Dusk, the early dusk of a winter's afternoon, had long since fallen, and the gas-lamps were glimmering redly through the raw grey twilight, when a woman came swiftly round the corner of a long dreary street in one of the worst parts of the west end of London.

It was not exactly a disreputable street. It began, indeed, respectably enough with mediocre, shabby-genteel houses opening out of the Uxbridge Road on the northern outskirts of Holland Park ; but as it went on the houses became smaller, poorer and more squalid—the street itself grew narrower and dirtier, and gin-palaces and coffee-taverns glared at each other across a vista of small greengrocers, rag and bottle shops, and common lodging-houses.

Finally it split in two, and while one branch ran up against a dead wall and a pig-stye, and ended there, the other narrowed still more, and became a mere lane leading into that wide district of vice, squalor, and misery, that haunt of navvies, gipsies, and brickmakers, known vaguely to the respectable public, and only too familiarly to the neighbouring police as the "Potteries."

It was from the direction of this latter place that

the woman in question was coming, but there was nothing either vicious or squalid in her appearance. On the contrary, she was tall, neat, and not ill-looking, with a thin, fresh-coloured face, very smooth hair, and bright, dark eyes which shone out with a very resolute expression from the depths of a huge bonnet of coarse black straw. Her dress was also black, neatly made, and of good material, but enlivened at the throat and wrists by a couple of broad scarlet bands, giving it something of a military appearance, while as she walked along, keeping not on the pavement, but in the middle of the street, she was singing in a loud, rather musical voice, a verse of a strange sort of hymn.

“Come rally round the flag, boys,
To battle now we go;
Cry, three times three, ‘Hurrah!’ boys,
For Satan is the foe.”

All around her, following and at times almost smothering her as they pressed at her side and crowded on her heels, was a motley throng composed of grimy, half-naked little street Arabs, brutal, unwashed youths of the costermonger class, and a few, rough-looking, flaunting girls, whose profession was even more easily recognisable, and these laughed, cheered, hung on to each other's arms, and danced about, yelling out choruses which not infrequently belonged to melodies breathing a very different spirit to the hymn, and in a way which would have impelled most modest and respectable women to hasty and immediate flight. The young woman in question, however, did not seem to mind it. Sometimes, indeed, she stopped short and wheeled round, facing on the rowdiest of her followers,

to the chief amongst whom she would hold out her clean, well-shaped hand, and address a few words of exhortation, spoken in a bright, eager way, and winding up with an invitation to go and hear General Booth at the Portobello Road Salvation Hall on the following night. Sometimes she would step out briskly to the right or left, and taking a tract from a parcel which she carried under her arm, offer it to one of the passers-by on the side-walk, and whenever they came to a public-house, which in this neighbourhood happened very frequently, she and all her company came to a full stop, while she lifted a little red flag which she carried high above her head, and cried out in a clear ringing voice, "Halt! An outpost of the devil! Fix bayonets and sound the battle-cry—Glory, hallelujah!" the last words in a shout echoed by the greater part of her audience with a vigour which brought out most of the drunkards or idlers in the bar to see what was up. Directly this was achieved, however, she burst into another verse of the hymn:

"Oh, come and join the army,
Leave hell-fire drinks alone.
Oh, come and join the army,
The army's marching on."

and wheeling, marched on, still singing vigorously, and, in the generality of cases, with the addition of two or three of the gin-drinkers to the train of her existing followers.

All through the day it had been raining hard, and the streets were a slop of wet and mud, while a bitter north wind swept round the corners, freezing noses and fingers with its damp and icy breath, and nearly taking

some of the smaller members of the 'army' off their legs; but though the woman leading them had been out all the afternoon, traversing the "Potteries" from end to end in the work of beating up recruits; and though during all that time she had never ceased to speak or sing, and had never once sat down or rested, her eyes were the brightest, her step the lightest, of the whole number. And once, when in crossing a street a half tipsy follower of the army came into rough collision with a young girl who was trying to cross the road before them, and flung his arm round her waist, the victim—a slender little creature with a pretty, childish face—had hardly time to utter one terrified cry before the salvation captain had turned, and seizing the brute by the wrist gave it such a wrench as set his captive free on the instant.

"Why, missis," said the fellow, surlily, "what the —— is that for? I was just bringin' yer in a lamb to the fold."

"Aye, indeed? And what are you, my man?" said the captain, briskly.

"Why, what else but a bloomin' lamb, too, my lass," was the answer, capped instantly by:

"Just so; and lambs don't bring each other into the fold. That's the sheep-dog's work, and I'm sheep-dog now; so come, child,

"Come and join the army,
We want a girl like you
Oh, come and shout for——"

But before the invitation, caught up in full chorus, had got so far, the girl appealed to had taken to her heels and fled with such swiftness that she was already

out of sight; while the army being now almost in front of "the fold," *i.e.*, a small mission-room, with a bright glow of gas and fire, and long tables set with smoking tin cans, visible through the open door, the captain gave up the idea of a fresh recruit, and inviting her companions to shout "Glory, hallelujah!" three times, led them in.

She did not stay, however, to assist at the tea and prayer meeting which followed; or even to get any rest or refreshment herself, but after reporting herself to a commanding officer of the male sex, and exchanging a few words with one or two "Hallelujah Lasses" in the room, slipped quietly through the throng, and letting herself out by a side door, walked swiftly away.

Her manner was quite altered now. She had put on a thick plaid shawl over her black and scarlet gown, and as she passed quickly and silently along, keeping her head down, and further sheltering herself from the rain, which had again begun to fall, under a big umbrella, there was nothing in her appearance to distinguish her from any other decent, middle-class woman, or connect her with the noisy apostle who had passed that way only half an hour before.

She had not far to go. Ten minutes' walk brought her out on the broad, well-lighted thoroughfare of the Uxbridge Road, and after keeping along it for a few hundred yards she stopped at a large ironmonger's shop, and knocking at the private door was at once admitted.

"You're late, Jane," said the person who did so, a rather older and sharper-visaged edition of herself; "tea is over, and father is so cross."

"Is he? I'm sorry, Ju, but I walked as quick as ever I could, and you don't generally begin tea till six."

"Yes we do—on chapel nights. Did you forget this was one? If so, don't tell father; for what made him so angry was hearing a lot of shouting at the back of the house some while ago. That idiot of an Ellen said it was the Salvation Army; and that, and you not being here, made father so wild I believe he'll expound on it to-night. You'd better stay at home, Jane."

"Oh no, that would make him worse; but I must have a cup of tea first. Do ask Ellen to make me one;" and only waiting to hang up her bonnet and shawl in the narrow oil-clothed entry, she passed on into the parlour at the back of the house.

It was a large room just behind the shop, and comfortably furnished, the windows hung with curtains of good red damask, and the walls with paper of the same colour, decorated with sundry photographs of leading Methodist divines, and one or two large and very black engravings of "The Opening of the Seventh Vial," the "Destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah," and other similarly cheerful subjects in polished maple frames; while the mahogany furniture and florid Brussels carpet, with a piece of oilcloth tacked over the centre of it to preserve its pristine freshness, bore witness to the fact of the owner being well-to-do in the world, and more especially in the business which forty years ago he had received from his father before him.

He was seated in an armchair by the fire now, a thin, fragile, little old man of over seventy, wearing a black velvet skull-cap on his bald head, and holding in one

hand a gold watch and chain which he held up angrily as his daughter entered, saying :

“Half-past six, Jane, and tea over before you come in! Nice doin’s—nice doin’s for a young woman of thirty-three. I was just saying to your sister, I supposed by midnight you’d be making your appearance. After that I’d not let the door be open for no one. No, not for my own children if they choose to forsake their homes and take to ‘riotous living,’ like the son of that afflicted father in the gospel. But even he came in to meals; for, as we know, a calf was roasted for him, and being as his elder brother was still out at work, it couldn’t yet have been sundown. Read Luke, chapter fifteen, verse thirty.”

“Yes, father dear,” said Jane, meekly; “but it’s not midnight now, and if we were in Israel I doubt if ’twould be sundown either; but I’m very sorry to be late all the same. I didn’t mean to be.”

“Mean! What’s the good of meaning when you are so? And is it one of your new Salvationist doctrines to browbeat and argufy with your old father as if he were a small child in a jography class? Jane, Jane, I’d have you remember what the Word says, ‘Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection,’ and do it. Read First Epistle to Timothy, chapter two, verse two. But there, all decent, godly ways are altered in these days when fathers have to hold their peace while young women take to dancing and yelling about the streets, and calling it religion. Ugh! Give me my hat and coat, child, and say no more. We ought to be at chapel now.”

Mr. Matthew Thompson belonged to what might em-

phatically be called a "serious family." There were five of them originally, a father and four sons, Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, of whom Luke died early, and Mark and John entered regularly into the service of religion, joined the Wesleyan body, and went out as missionaries, one to India and the other to Africa, while Matthew remained at home, succeeded his father in the ironmongery business, thrived wonderfully, married, and built a chapel for the Primitive Methodists, of which connexion he had always been a member. Of this chapel he was made first deacon and then elder; and now in his old age enjoyed nothing more than hearing himself hold forth on Wednesday evenings before his own family, and a select number of fellow-worshippers, whose admiring groans kept pace and tune with his discourse.

He was a widower at present with three daughters, Judith and Jane, whom we have seen, and an elder one, Deborah, who went out to India to join her uncle John and convert the heathen; but fell in love *en route* with the first mate of the Indiaman, and ended by converting him instead, and to such good purpose that she was now the wife of a P. and O. captain, living in a handsome villa at Devonport, and much looked up to by her neighbours and relations.

Jane's defalcation into the ranks of the Salvationists had been a sore blow at home, being taken in the light of a deliberate slight and injury by old Mr. Thompson, whose favourite child she was, and, who as an elder of the church, and having a decided weakness for decency and order in all walks of life, felt very much as a country retcor might do whose eldest son had taken to

preaching at a Dissenting chapel in his father's village.

As an old friend of the family said, however: "What else could you expect from one of the Thompsons? They'd all *got* the Light, and they was bound to show it for themselves one way or another. Look at John in India with a wife and twelve children to provide for; and poor Mrs. John spending her life on the high seas, travelling to and fro with one or other of 'em—what an elect vessel he was! Why, The *Madras Christian* went into mourning down a whole column when he died; and there were two of his sons missionaries now; and his eldest daughter married to a Scotch minister, with her only boy a Bible-reader in Aberdeen. And look at Mark, burying his wife and child out among the African niggers, and then only coming back to bring home his little granddaughter before going out again and dying there like the rest. That child of his, Esther, hadn't done well, indeed, having been so led away as to fall in love with and marry a mere man-o'-war officer, a fine fly-away gentleman, and one of the carnal-minded: but she had expiated her fault by dying very speedily afterwards, and so one wouldn't wish to be hard on her; while, as for the little girl, no one could say the Thompsons hadn't done their duty by her. Didn't Mrs. John take her from her grandfather and educate her with her own younger children, she being in England just then for that purpose? And wouldn't she have left her and Mary at school together when she had to go back to India herself if that ungrateful ne'er-do-weel, the father, hadn't turned up and carried the child off to make a worldling of her like himself,

and a fine lady into the bargain? She was probably a lost sheep altogether now; but it couldn't be helped; and, after all, the Matthew Thompsons had never had anything to do with her; Mrs. John, for all that she was such a godly woman and one of the elect, holding herself rather high, and making a deal of excuse out of living at Deal to keep her own family and the little Esther, from much visiting at the ironmonger's shop in the Uxbridge Road."

That respectable household was just going to bed at present. Chapel, at which old Matthew had discoursed with unusual unction, bringing hot blushes to poor Jane's cheeks by his allusions to the "indecent and scandalous behaviour of certain so-called religionists in the neighbourhood," was over, and, having had his supper, and sat over the fire, chatting for some time, while his daughters stitched and listened dutifully, the old man had retired upstairs, Judith accompanied him to see to his bedroom fire and perform any other little filial offices he might require, while Jane remained below to put out the gas and to see that the house was properly bolted up for the night, when, just as she had descended to the basement to look to the fastenings there, she was startled by one loud single knock at the front door.

For a moment she hesitated whether to answer it or not. It was late—nearly eleven o'clock—and they were not expecting any consignment from the shop. Besides, the knock had a heavy blundering sound, as though it had been dealt at random by some drunken passer. As she stood, however, in the entry below, candle in hand, and doubtful whether to go up or remain where she was, the knock was repeated twice over, and louder than

before, and without more ado Jane ran upstairs and began to unbolt and unbar the front door, which only a few moments previously she had herself fastened up for the night. As she did so, and got it open, such a rush of wind and rain came in as drove her backwards and extinguished her candle, preventing her for the moment from distinguishing anything but a dark object like a cab drawn up outside, while a gruff voice asked :

“Is this ’ere Mr. Thompson’s private door?”

“Yes, it is,” Jane answered, sheltering herself behind it as she spoke. “What do you want?”

The gruff voice repeated the first part of her answer to someone in the cab, adding, for her benefit :

“It’s a young lady as belongs here. The gent’s helping her out. I should ha’ got here sooner, but I missed the corner an’ druv too far.”

“A young lady! Oh, but it’s a mistake. It must be some other Thompson. There’s no young lady expected here,” Jane said quickly, but stopped short and nearly uttered a cry, for by this time the gentleman—who appeared by his dress to be a clergyman—had extricated a slender girlish figure from the cab, and, as the two emerged from the wet and darkness, Jane saw, by the dim light of a gas-lamp outside, a small pale face looking eagerly up into hers, and recognised in it the girl whom, earlier in the same evening, she had rescued from the clutch of that ill-behaved member of her little army.

And the man who was with her was worse than any ordinary clergyman, being a Romish priest whom she also knew by sight as having a church somewhere

in the neighbourhood, and being often to be met with among the slums and purlieus of the Potteries.

Jane Thompson was a brave woman, but at the sight her courage nearly failed her, and for an instant she had a wild thought of banging the door in their faces, and taking refuge under her bed, for the thought which instantly flashed upon her was that it was a police case, and that this priest of Baal was backing the young woman up in it to injure the Salvation cause; and oh, what *would* father say?—he who cared so much for respectability, and was always predicting that some of her proceedings would bring him into disrepute. In imagination she had time to see her whole career spoilt, and herself sent off in disgrace to her rich sister in Devonport, even while the priest was asking:

“Are you a Miss Thompson?”

But at the sound of his voice her courage came back, and she even came a step forward, blocking up the door as she answered him sharply enough:

“Yes, I am; but I don’t know you, or this young woman either. What do you want with me?”

The girl put out her little gloved hands with a quick appealing gesture. She was trembling from head to foot, soaked with rain, and her voice was little more than a whisper.

“I am your cousin—Esther,” she said. “Don’t you remember me? I used to live with Aunt John at Deal when I was a little girl, I remember you quite well. You are—surely you are Jane, are not you?”

“Yes, I am Jane,” said the Salvation captain, blankly.

The surprise and relief were so great that she could

hardly collect herself or understand. Then, with fuller comprehension :

“But—*little Esther!* Uncle Mark’s granddaughter! You don’t mean it. Come in—come in out of the rain quickly.”

She put out her strong hand, and grasped the girl’s frozen fingers warmly, drawing her into the passage. For the moment she had forgotten the priest, and he had already stepped back.

“It is all right, then!” he said to Hetty, speaking in a kind brisk manner, “and I can leave you safely? I’m glad of it, so good night, my child, and God bless you! No, no, nonsense!” as the girl turned from her cousin and clasped his hand, pouring out eager and almost tearful thanks in a weak, tremulous voice; “I did no more for you than anyone should do for a fellow-creature. Good-bye.”

And he was gone.

Jane shut the hall-door with a bang, and took her cousin’s hand again.

“Esther,” she said, solemnly, “I don’t know how you got into such company; but if father had seen me with that man of Belial, I doubt he would hardly have kept me under his roof afterwards. You shall tell me about it; but say nothing to him when you see him, and come in. You’re heartily welcome, for all that your visit’s so late and unexpected a one. Why, child, you’re wet to the bone!”

And, indeed, the rain was dripping heavily off the hem of Hetty’s black skirt, and all her pretty curling hair was gummed and plastered together with wet, while there was not a tinge of colour in the little face at

which Judith, who had heard the knock and come down to see what was the matter, was now staring in amazement. Her manner, however, was kind enough when Jane made her understand who it was.

"Cousin Esther's child! Her that died abroad? Why, to be sure, so you are, and I remember you now, though you're so altered. But I thought you were being brought up by some grand friends of your father?"

"Yes, cousin," said Hetty, timidly. Judith's sharp face and voice frightened her, and she was shivering all over with cold and nervousness. It was so long since she had seen any of her mother's relations that they were like strangers to her, "and I should not have come without writing; but I was only the lady's companion, and something happened. She—she was not kind to me, and I did not know what to do. I was in great trouble, and I came away. I—I could not help it."

Her voice, which had been growing hoarser and weaker broke down altogether, and she sank down suddenly on to a chair, bursting into violent weeping. Judith held up her hands.

"Did you ever!" she exclaimed. "Why, child, what's the matter, and where have you been to get in this state? Jane, she's like a drowned rat."

Jane put her hand on her sister's shoulder and pushed her gently aside.

"I'm going to put her to bed," she said. "She's not fit to talk now, and, Judith, heat up the kettle and make a good hot glass of brandy-and-water. It's an accursed thing usually, I hope Esther thinks so, but when folks are wet and ill—Come, dear, don't you cry so. I'll

give you a share of my bed to-night, and you shall tell us your story in the morning, when father's here to listen to it too."

She put her arm round Hetty as she spoke, and half helped, half led her upstairs to her own room, where she put the girl into a low chair, and bidding her take off her wet boots, began opening drawers and getting out articles of dry underclothing for her. But when they were got, poor Hetty was too spent even to stand up, far less to put them on unaided. Her head had drooped till it rested on the arm of the chair, and she was still shivering all over, but she said faintly that it was nothing, and she was not ill, only cold and tired—so very tired. And Jane fairly lifted her up in her strong arms, undressed her, and had got her into bed before Judith came in with the brandy-and-water, and a little tray of refreshments.

Hetty, however, was unable to touch the latter. She tried to do so, rather than seem ungracious to her cousins; but something in her throat seemed to prevent her swallowing, and it was with great difficulty that she could even take the hot drink which Jane, with a mental "God forgive me!" held to her lips. It seemed to revive her, however, for she smiled and said "Thank you" gratefully. Then with another effort: "I must tell you...I am better now...how I came. It was Cousin Mary, Aunt John's daughter, I was going to see. She had written to me some time ago to tell me of her marriage, and ask me...but I was not allowed to go, and then to-day when I went—it was all the way to Brixton...she was not there. The house was empty, and no one knew...I could not find her."

"Find her? Why no, I should think not," cried Judith. "Mary and her husband left for Liverpool six weeks ago. He'd got the offer of a post as organist to a big church there. I wonder she didn't tell you. You, poor child, you've had quite a journey over here then!"

Hetty looked up at her. Her voice was getting weaker and more husky and broken.

"I did not know what to do...I had come a long way, and I had had no breakfast. It was very early. I went to a baker's shop and got some bread, and then I took a cab. I meant to come to you. I did not know the address, but I thought it was Uxbridge Road... and then I missed my bag. The cabman said I must have left it at the baker's, but it was not there, and my purse was in it. I had no money left—not a penny. I walked on and on; but it rained...it was raining all the time."

"You *walked from Brixton!*" cried Judith. Jane was too pitiful for speech.

"Not all the way. I had a little ring of mamma's. and a woman in a shop lent me half-a-crown for it. That took me to Uxbridge Road Station, but I was afraid to spend it all. I thought I would walk on again and enquire. People sent me backwards and forwards. There were so many Thompsons, and none of them knew . . . I got quite to despair; and it was getting late. It was dusk. Once when I was crossing a street a tipsy man caught hold of me. I was so frightened I ran till I was tired. There was a church close by with a deep porch and a bench in it; and beside the door a little window through which one could see the church inside, and a lamp burning before the altar. It was so quiet there I did not feel frightened any more; and it

was sheltered too . . . I thought I would stay there all night, and I sat down on the bench and fell asleep . . . It was the priest woke me . . . He was coming back from a sick call, and he was very kind. He got a directory, and found out where there was an ironmonger's shop with the name; and then he brought me here . . . If—if I may stay to-night——”

Her voice had become quite inaudible, and Jane bade her go to sleep at once; but long after her eyes were closed the cousins sat by her bed watching her. They had time now to recognise the extreme beauty of the fair little face in its framing of dark, shining curls, the tiny white hands, and the fine texture of her black cashmere frock, with its dainty ruffings of lace all soiled and draggled with wet. Certainly the young girl had lived with rich people, but what was the trouble which had turned her out on the world like this? And as Jane bent over her she saw that the pretty face had flushed to a deep feverish red, and that the breath came in hoarse, struggling gasps through the dry lips. The girl tossed from side to side, and moaned in her sleep; and Jane sent her sister to bed, and sat up all night, too anxious herself to sleep.

CHAPTER XIII.

WHY SHE LEFT THEM.

AND here we had better go back a little for a full explanation of the mystery of which Jane Thompson was not to have a clue for many and many a day.

When Hetty recovered from that fainting-fit at the lodge, the servants busied about her were still talking of the event which filled all their minds, and as the full meaning of their comments and ejaculations took shape and form in her own brain, a feeling of utter, lonely helplessness and horror came over her, combined with a strong sense of guilt, or rather of a guilty consciousness, which made her afraid to open her eyes lest those around her should see it written in them, and gave her strength sooner than otherwise she would have thought it possible to sit up and announce herself well enough to go to her own room.

It was some comfort to be there, away from everybody, and with the door locked between herself and intruders, that she might sit down and face the new problem which the last few minutes had unfolded before her.

Plainly put, it was thi

At the time Captain Pentreath was arrested, Hetty fully believed him to be guilty of the crime of which

he was accused ; and she grounded that belief on his own words and actions, to which she had been an unseen and most unwilling witness on that terrible night when he paced to and fro in his room, muttering curses and threats against the man who had insulted him, while she, Hetty, crouched trembling with terror behind the door of the closet where she had sought a refuge. Who the offender might be, or what the offence he had received, she had of course no means of guessing ; but the effect they had produced on Captain Pentreath was so much beyond any form of anger that she had ever witnessed or imagined, and the language to which he gave vent when uncontrolled by any suspicion of an auditor, so shocked and appalled her, that it was all she could do to keep herself from crying out to him to desist and keep silence. Twice she heard him inveighing against some "Carstairs," who had prevented him from taking the "other fellow" by the throat and horsewhipping him then and there. But immediately afterwards he muttered :

"Well, well, it can't be helped now ; and I'll run up the first thing to-morrow, go straight to his rooms, and either make him write out an apology, or shoot him like a dog. G—d ! I wish it were to-morrow now !"

Then there had come a rustling sound and silence, and Hetty had just had time to think, while drops of cold perspiration gathered on her brow, was he going to undress and go to bed ?—and, if so, how—*how* should she ever manage to escape ?—when he spoke again, this time aloud, and so near the closet-door that she almost screamed.

"By Heaven, I'll do it to-night, after all ! There's

time yet, if I catch the next train ; and I can't sleep under this dishonour. I should go mad. He *shall* retract !”

And then there were a few hasty movements about the room, and the steps passed away again into the hall. A puff of cold air fanned Hetty in the face, showing her the hall-door was open. It closed again, but quietly and with a dull sound, as if he did not wish to disturb the house ; and then——

Thank God ! thank God ! she was free—sick, faint, and dizzy with suspense and agitation—but free at last to escape from her prison and regain the shelter of her own room ; not to sleep, for the terrible experience she had passed through made any thought of slumber impossible to her ; but to lie trembling with emotion and pouring out heartfelt prayers of thankfulness through the remaining hours of the night.

It was this that made her so white and languid on the following morning, and filled her with such longing to see George Hamilton, that she might tell him the whole story of his cousin's persecution and her adventure ; and while giving him the photograph, for which she had paid so high a price, implore him to find out Captain Pentreath, and prevent him from carrying out the threats, the mere utterance of which had filled her with such dread and horror on the previous night.

It was this too which gave such a strange colour to her manner, and forced those incoherent exclamations from her that had so puzzled her lover when he came to her with the tidings which seemed to her a mere consummation, even more prompt and ghastly than she had expected, of those very threats.

And then Mrs. Pentreath had interrupted them, and in the scene which followed, all opportunity for an explanation was lost; nor, as we have seen, did she get another till, in that brief interview in the hall, she learnt from the vicar's view of the case that to say anything of this knowledge which she alone possessed would be to condemn the man who, whatever his faults, had been her friend once, and was still her host, and was the only son and hope of her benefactress.

She was glad then not to be obliged to do it. Even on her own account, and for the sake of every maidenly instinct within her, she would have shrunk unutterably from telling anybody but one very near and dear to her, of how she had been hidden in a man's room at night, when that man was there also, though unaware of her presence. Now indeed that it was over, she began to reflect that she had run a great risk for a very small gain, and that George Hamilton might well be angry with her for doing so. To be obliged, therefore, to keep it in her own breast for the sake of others, and of that poor heartbroken mother in especial, was a real gladness and relief to the girl's heart. With all her horror of Captain Pentreath, a horror intensified into something like actual disgust by the insight she now had into his real character, she could not feel herself obliged to come forward and injure herself for the mere sake of injuring him and bringing him to justice. George should know all the rest, all that could be told on the very first opportunity, and that one fact—the fact of her presence as a witness to Captain Pentreath's otherwise unguessed-at visit to his house—should remain a

secret till such time as she might whisper it safely in her husband's ears.

So she thought, so she determined, even thanking God in her innocent fashion that the right way had been made the easiest to her ; and now—now, as if in mockery of her gratitude, there had come Mrs. Pentreath's sudden change of manner to her, her cruel insinuations, each one piercing like a poisoned arrow to the girl's inmost soul, and stabbing her feminine pride and rectitude at every dart ; her lover's cold standing aloof, and colder, sterner looks ; and then their forsaking her, their driving away with the woman who had maligned her, and leaving her behind as unworthy even to share with them in their sorrow and anxiety at the very time when it was in her power, and hers alone, to render them a greater service than any other human being could have done.

For the inquest, which had brought in a verdict of wilful murder against Ernest Pentreath, had also shown to her—aye, in opposition to all her previous beliefs, that he was utterly innocent of it ; and that she, and she only, could have proved him so had she spoken earlier.

The doctor's testimony—and before she went upstairs she made Hickson repeat it over again to her in all its details—had shown beyond disproof, not only that Major Hollis's death-wound could have been self-inflicted, but that it *had* been inflicted—no matter by what hand—an hour, if not more, before the time at which the body had been discovered.

Now that time was a quarter to twelve, and at a quarter to eleven, one hour previously, Captain

Pentreath had only just entered the train at Kew Gardens station on his return journey to town.

Mr. Carstairs, who left the club with him, had already accounted for his actions till a little after nine, the hour at which they parted, and as Hetty knew that the train by which Ernest arrived at Kew left Victoria at thirteen minutes to ten, at which time Major Hollis was still at the club, it was manifestly impossible and out of his power, that he could have committed the deed of which at present he stood accused.

As Hetty thought over it, seeing bit by bit each feature of the story in all its terrible significance; the Hand of God interposing, as it were, to save a would-be homicide from the crime he was on his way to perpetrate, her cheeks and hands seemed to become icy cold, a great sickness and shuddering came over her, and for a moment she was in dread of swooning again.

For it was impossible she could speak now. That was certain; and as soon as she could recover her scattered senses she told herself so with such nervous haste and vehemence that she might have been silencing some unseen monitor within.

If nothing else had compelled her to silence, that painful scene with Mrs. Pentreath, and the aspersions to which she had been subjected before the lawyer and her lover, would have done so.

Was it likely that her explanation of the facts she had to tell would be credited by the woman who only yesterday had pronounced her word worthless, and had already accused her of a private understanding with a man to save whom she would be risking her own good name?

But even without this her lips were sealed, for how could she, a girl of nineteen, without father or mother and with no fortune or dependence but her own unsullied reputation, be expected to go into a witness-box and swear that she was in a man's bedroom at nearly eleven o'clock at night, and when the rest of the household supposed her to be in bed; a man, too, whom she detested, to whose cowardly trickery about her photograph all this trouble was owing; who boasted of women's favours even before they were received, and whose whole reckless and libertine character had, since that fatal quarrel in the club, been made so public to the world in general as to render it impossible for any modest woman to put herself forward as engaged in what, to outsiders, would at best seem a silly flirtation, without serious and lasting injury to her own good name?

And then her story itself! How far-fetched and improbable it sounded even in her own ears! Would anyone believe it; or would it not rather appear as if she had trumped it up at the last moment as the only means of saving the life of a man who had been her lover.

Thinking of what might be said, or worse, of what might be insinuated, by those who were not kind enough to believe the whole thing an invention; of the colour which even his mother, however grateful for her son's escape, might put on the testimony which had rescued him, Hetty shivered and moaned, hiding her hot face in her hands as though the mocking sceptical faces which she saw in imagination were actually fixed on it; and telling herself with almost passionate

vehemence that it would be absurd, impossible for any one or any law, human or divine, to expect a girl in her situation to speak out now, and ruin all her prospects in life by doing so.

For one thing, George Hamilton would never care to marry any woman who had put herself in the position of being talked of and gossiped about as having been concerned in so questionable an adventure. She knew that well; and though something told her also that in any case all must be at an end now, she had enough of her native pride and spirit left to desire that their parting, if it must be, should be of her doing, not his; that she should set him free of her own will; not give him the right to put her aside at his.

So, over and over again went the weary round of her mind, sometimes losing itself in a half-stupified maze, sometimes breaking down into passionate weeping, but always coming round to the same conclusion, and holding on to it with a firmer and more desperate hand. The silence which hitherto she had kept for Mrs. Pentreath's sake and her own she must keep now for the latter alone, and to do so she must go away at once from the house which belonged to the man she was leaving to his fate, and to which, if that fate were kind to him, he would return.

With all her heart she hoped that he would do. She had no wish to injure him by her silence. If it had seemed clear, or even probable, to her that by keeping it she must inevitably do so, and condemn an innocent man to shameful and life-long punishment, she could not, whatever the temptation, have persisted in it; but it was not so. Hickson himself had assured her that the

decision of a coroner's jury told for nothing in the subsequent examination before a magistrate; that all that they were really called together for was to find out the cause of death; and that, but for the unusual haste with which this inquest had been held, the point which might have exculpated Captain Pentreath would have been foreseen and provided against.

"But don't you take on so, miss," added the kind-hearted butler, blubbering a little himself at the thought of his master's situation. "Nobody don't pay no attention to the finding of an ignorant lot o' men like them. Why, you never see such a set—little greengrocers and pork-butchers, and the like, without an 'H' to their name among the whole of 'em. The case is to come on before the magistrates to-morrow; and they tell me as Sir Thomas Ingle, as is a real gent, and come of a good old family, miss, is on the bench. The captain will only have to call his own witnesses—and no doubt as he's got plenty—to prove he's being down here that evening, and the case will be at an end. You make your mind easy about that, miss."

And Hetty was trying to do so—trying with all her might, telling herself over and over again that Hickson must know more of such things than she did, and that nothing could be more probable than that Ernest Pentreath had no need to rely on her to prove an *alibi* for him—nothing more quixotic than to sacrifice her own reputation simply to strengthen the hands of a man who had not the slightest claim on her generosity, but was, as she also knew, guilty in will, if not in deed, of the very crime for which he had been arrested.

In any case he deserved some punishment, and a brief

period of suspicion and detention was no very severe one after all. Her penalty was far the hardest—hers, which was to leave home, and friends, and lover, and go forth into the wide world alone on his account. And it must be done at once, before Mrs. Pentreath or the vicar returned, that was certain. Such a secret as she had to keep could not be kept under the roof of a woman so nearly concerned in it as the prisoner's mother; neither could she look in her lover's eyes and keep it from him; nor affect to give him the explanation he had said he should require, and withhold the most important part of it. Between those who were to be husband and wife there could be no half confidences; and with all her would-be security in the rightfulness and necessity of her decision, she felt only too keenly that submitted to George Hamilton it would not hold water for one second.

No, her only safety from herself was in flight. The remaining question was *where* or to whom? and it was like a gleam of light across her wearied brain and spirit, worn out by long watching and mental conflict, when suddenly there came into her mind the thought of one of those relatives of her long-lost mother to whom her memory had once before turned when Captain Pentreath's persecution first impelled her to leave his mother's roof.

She had never seen any of them since her father came down to Deal and took her away to live with him; and shortly afterwards Mrs. John Thompson had returned to India taking with her her three elder children; but now and then, at rather rare intervals, Hetty had written to her aunt, and had received letters from her, and though most of her cousins were too much her seniors for there

to have been much sympathy between them, there was one, the youngest, and a girl, for whom in childhood she had felt so much affection, that it was a real pleasure when, a few months previously, this cousin wrote to her, saying she was married and living at Brixton, and expressing a cordial wish that Hetty would come and stay with her for a time. Hetty had answered the letter very cordially, sending "Cousin Mary" a pretty present, and saying how much she should like to accept the invitation; but on its being communicated to Mrs. Pentreath, such decided cold water had been thrown on it that the girl had not liked to press the request, and since then nothing more had been said upon it.

Now, however, the case was different, and as she got out Mrs. White's letter and read the address, Number 10, Paradise Villas, Brixton, the words stood out before her fevered and tear-dimmed eyes, as though written by an angel's hand.

She would go to Mary. Mary would take her in and advise her, perhaps would keep her till she could find some honest means of keeping herself, which, with her good health and good education, could not be difficult; and with this thought in her mind she rose to her feet, and drew back the curtains from the window. Outside it was already morning, a cold blustering winter's morning with no suggestion of sunrise in the grey leaden sky, no rosy tinge on the dark outlines of distant gables, no chirp of early bird to break the "morne" and dreary silence. Even Nature seemed against her in its hard, unfriendly grimness. Even the tall trees seemed to frown at her, and shake thier leafless boughs in mocking disdain for

her wretchedness ; but at least there was light enough to see by, and the unkindness of the surrounding things only made her more anxious to be gone. Jaded and spent as she was, she had but one desire in her tired brain and bruised and wounded heart, the desire to escape from all these complications and people who had been so cruel to her ; and with this strong upon her, she began hurriedly and noiselessly to change her dress, and put up a few things in a little hand-bag before starting on the journey she had before her.

Her clothes, with the exception of those she had on, she was obliged to leave behind her, also her ornaments, all but a tiny pearl cross which Mr. Hamilton had given her on one of her birthdays, and her own mother's betrothal-ring. The rest had been presents from Mrs. Pentreath ; and in leaving her roof thus, she felt as if she had forfeited any further right to them ; but what little money she possessed was part of a regular allowance paid to her quarterly by her guardian from the day when that lady told her that she was to be her "little companion ;" and to this, therefore, she knew she had a plain right. It was only a couple of sovereigns and a few shillings ; but that would be enough, and more than enough, the child thought, for the present emergency ; and having put on a black dress under her neat, dark-coloured Newmarket, and covered her pretty curls with the quietest little hat she possessed, she slipped quietly downstairs into the library, opened one of the long French windows, and drawing it to again behind her with as little noise as possible, departed.

The tears were running over her cheeks as she did so ; and, even at the risk of being seen, she could not

leave the garden without making a detour to press her lips to the cold, rough wood of a rustic bench under a lime-tree, where she had passed many a happy, idle hour in summer days gone by. But her resolution was taken, and by the time the late-rising servants at Guelder Lodge were beginning to creep downstairs and set about lighting fires and opening doors, Hetty was already in the train *en route* for Brixton.

Of how she fared in her enterprise, of her consternation at finding only an empty house where she had hoped for a kindly welcome, and of her subsequent wanderings and adventures, in which her youth and timidity, her ignorance of London streets and utter unaccustomedness to going about alone and unprotected, were all so many enemies in her path, we have already heard in the brief disconnected account given by the feeble, faltering lips in Jane Thompson's room, and listened to with sympathetic interest by her two cousins. But the rest of her story, which we have known from the beginning, where she came from, what was her trouble, who were the people she had been living with, whether they had sent her away from them, or whether they were still unaware of her departure, all these things were still a mystery to Jane and her sister, and were destined to remain so for far longer than they expected. Morning came indeed, and Hetty awakened; but only to high fever, wandering, and stupor. Her throat, too, seemed so much swollen and inflamed that when she did speak, the words were scarcely audible; and greatly alarmed at her appearance, Jane sent off the servant in hot haste for a doctor, and went herself to break the news to her father.

At that time outside every little newspaper shop and library were exhibited big posters bearing among other huge black-lettered advertisements of exciting events, "THE SHOOTING CASE IN ALBION STREET! PRISONER COMMITTED FOR TRIAL."

At that same moment Mrs. Pentreath and the vicar were driving past the ironmonger's shop on their way back to Kew!

CHAPTER XIV.

A HOPELESS SEARCH.

HE left the vicar and his aunt staring blankly at each other, as the maid's unexpected announcement fell upon their ears: even Mrs. Pentreath was roused from her trance of sorrow by the tidings of this new loss. She hardly seemed to understand it, and repeated blankly,

"Miss Mavors *gone*?"

"Yes, ma'am, since quite early yesterday morning. We fancied that perhaps she had gone to you—that you expected her."

"To *me*! No, certainly not. I thought she was here. I—— George, what can it mean?" Mrs. Pentreath asked, turning her startled eyes on him. For an instant there was a look in his which almost frightened her, but it was gone even before he answered:

"What does this woman mean? Speak out, please, and tell your mistress plainly. When did Miss Mavors leave?"

"Quite early yesterday morning, sir. Leastways, she didn't answer when she was called, and when Hannah went in after awhile to see if she'd like her breakfast in bed the room was empty."

"And did she leave no message? d none of you see her go out?"

"No, sir; it must have been before we were up, or when no one was about, and she didn't say a word to anyone."

"But Thomsen"—this new shock had shaken Mrs. Pentreath afresh, and she sat down trembling and very pale—"why did you not send to us, or let me know?"

"Well ma'am, Hickson had started to attend the—the court afore we went into Miss Hetty's room, and afterwards we all made sure she'd gone to you. That was what puzzled me, ma'am, the not seeing her get out of the carriage."

"And you don't know—you have no idea where else she can have gone?"

"Indeed, no, ma'am. Why the last thing I should ha' thought of was her being able to go anywhere, so ill as she looked the night before. Not a bite or sup had she tasted since you left her, ma'am, and fainted dead away as soon as ever she saw Hickson come in with the first news."

"Fainted?"

"Yes, sir: but not for more than a minute or two, and though when she come to she sat up at once, and said she didn't want a doctor, or anything but to go to bed, she looked quite white and dazed-like still, and in the morning, as I said, she was gone. She hadn't been to bed at all, either, for the pillow wasn't rumped; and the sheets was turned down just as Hannah left them."

For a minute there was silence, while Mrs. Pentreath and the vicar looked at each other, a great dread in both hearts, in hers a little remorse as well. Was it

she in truth who had driven the girl from her home? or was it—— She stretched out her hands to her nephew with an almost imploring gesture.

“Oh, George——” she was beginning, when Mowcher’s voice, prim and cold as usual, interrupted her:

“If you please, ma’am, here is a note which I’ve just found in your room. I think it is from Miss Mavors, ma’am.

Mowcher was right, it was from Hetty, a mere scrap of paper, scribbled over in pencil, and much blurred with tears which must have rained down fast on it in the writing; but when Mrs. Pentreath handed it to the vicar, there were one or two fresh drops on it as well, and she seemed afraid to raise her eyes to his.

“I am going away,” it said, “because after what you said to me to-day I am sure you cannot want to see me, or have me near you any more. And I could not stay—I could not stay with anyone who thought me as bad as you do; for, indeed—indeed, I have always tried to be good, and do what I thought would please you. I would dearly like to help you now; but you have made it impossible, and I cannot even tell you how. Thank you for all your past kindness, and please thank Mr. Hamilton, too, and bid him good-bye for me. Of course all he wanted me to do is at an end now. I understand that, and there is no need for anyone to trouble about me. I am going to my mother’s people. They are quite poor and common: but they are very good, and I feel sure they will take care of me till I can find something to do to earn my own living.”

The vicar did not say anything for a minute. He had turned aside to read the letter, and stood with his

head bent over it so long, that Mrs. Pentreath grew anxious and spoke to him, saying in a faltering voice that it was not her fault. She had never meant to be harsh or unjust, or to drive the child away. Surely George could not think she did! The vicar did not answer her. Instead he asked :

“Who are these relations, and where do they live?”

“I don’t know, I’m sure. I wish I did; but the fact is I never encouraged her to speak of them. They are quite common people, I know. Poor Jack’s marriage was a terrible *mésalliance*, and the one comfort in it was that the wife died before she could drag him down to her level.”

“But don’t you even know their name? Surely you must have heard it!”

“Indeed I have not. There was an aunt who went out to India eventually, and—— Stay! she had a letter from a Mrs. White, a cousin, she said; and who wrote from somewhere in Brixton wanting a visit from her some months ago. She did not go. I thought it would be unkind to her to permit her to associate with mere tradespeople, which they were; and, indeed, George, I——”

The vicar did not seem to hear. He interrupted her very quietly :

“Do you know whereabouts in Brixton this person’s address was?”

“No—Yes! Hetty read it out to me; and I remember thinking it was just the sort of place that kind of person would live in. Paradise Row, or Parade, or something of that sort. I don’t think the child really cared about going; and, besides, it was im-

possible. I couldn't have spared Mowcher to take her there and bring her back ; and she certainly couldn't have gone by herself. She was much too young and pretty to be let go about in the London streets alone ; and, as you know, I have never allowed her to do so."

" Ah ! "

The word escaped the vicar's lips involuntarily ; but it silenced Mrs. Pentreath as suddenly as though she had heard in it an echo of the thought that gave it utterance. " What if the girl was alone in those streets now ! "

His next question seemed a sequel to it.

" Do you know if she had any money ? "

" Very little, I fear. Her next quarter's allowance is due only a fortnight hence ; and girls are never very provident. "

The vicar took up his hat.

" Good-bye, " he said, quietly. " I am going to find her. "

" But not this instant ; not without saying you don't think I am to blame or this ! George, my dear, be generous. I know how bitter it must be to you if you loved her ; but believe me, it is quite as much so to me, who now, in the very moment of being bereaved of my only son, find myself deserted by the child to whom I have been as a mother for the last five years. If you turn against me too, and reproach me——"

" My dear aunt, " said the vicar, gravely, " if I were to do either at such a time as this, I should be a brute, and worse. All I had to say about this unhappy mistake of yours, I said at the hotel yesterday, and I am not going to repeat it either now or at any other

day. But I must go now. Hetty is my affianced wife; and my first duty at present is to find her, and make sure that she is safe and under proper protection. I will come back to you afterwards."

And then he went away. He was sorry for his aunt. He had spoken kindly to her; but—he was only a man, after all, and he could not forget that look in his little love's face when he left her with the woman who had so insulted her.

Every nerve in his body was tingling to be upon her track.

It was easy enough to track his missing sweetheart to Brixton. That tear-blotted little letter of hers, combined with his aunt's information about the cousin, had given him the right clue; and a very little research among South London directories further supplied him with the address, "Number 10, Paradise Villas," in conjunction with the name he wanted. Then, too, the ticket-clerk at Kew was able to fix the train by which Hetty had travelled, having taken particular notice of her, and wondered what could take the young lady, whom he knew by sight, to town at such an untimely hour of a winter's morning, so that, had Mrs White been really living in the villa aforementioned, there is little doubt that, despite Hetty's anxiety to keep the place of her destination a secret, the vicar would have descended on them both within little more than twenty-four hours after her flight. His disappointment, therefore, at being confronted with an empty house covered with notices "To Let," may be better imagined than described, and nearly equalled that of poor Hetty herself.

In vain he made enquiries about the Whites, hoping that in finding them he should also find her in their company. These enquiries only proved the truth of that well-known saying, that a man may live three years in London without knowing the name of his next door neighbour, or being known by sight to his opposite one. All that the other denizens of Paradise Villas could tell him of the Whites was that they were a youngish couple, and very quiet, kept to themselves, and didn't seem to have any acquaintances in the neighbourhood; and that the man looked like a clerk and went into town every day, and that the woman did her marketing herself, and brought home the provisions in a basket instead of having the tradespeople call, in addition to all which the lady at Number Twelve added the one piece of information which was of interest to him—namely, that he was not the only person who wanted to know what had become of the people next door, for no further back than yesterday a young woman had driven up in a cab, and had knocked and rung, and seemed in a dreadful state of mind at finding the house empty. But *she* had said she was a relation, and as the good lady in question did remember to have heard tell that Mrs. White came from India, where all her folks were, maybe the young party had just arrived from there too; and, if so, no wonder she turned so white—which a sheet was nothing to it!—and looked as if she should faint at finding her relatives were gone, and that no one could tell anything of them. Did the lady kindly imparting this information know what had become of the young woman in question? No, the lady didn't, barring that she had walked away, having dismissed her cab first, and that she

looked so frightened and miserable like—for all she was a pretty little creature too—that she, the speaker, had felt quite sorry for her.

How the vicar felt need not be told. He too remembered that in speaking of her childish days Hetty had referred to an aunt at Deal, who had afterwards returned to India; and this, in conjunction with what the woman told him respecting Mrs. White's people, and with his own entire ignorance of the very existence of the Uxbridge Road Thompsons, filled him with an amount of distress and anxiety respecting her which it needed no description of the poor child's scared and unhappy face to intensify.

And as time went on, that anxiety became increased a thousand-fold rather than lessened, for, try as he might, he could obtain no further clue, no hint, even, as to the whereabouts of the missing girl. If she had melted into the ground on turning the corner from Paradise Villas she could not have more utterly disappeared, and never before had he realised how fatally easy such disappearances are made by the very hugeness and crowding of this great metropolis, where a person has only, as it were, to walk out of their own house and vanish straightway from all sight and ken of everyone connected with them.

He advertised, of course, and by-and-by he even went so far as to employ a detective on his own account; but, with regard to the advertisement, he was greatly hampered by the necessity of diverting any chance of scandal from Hetty's name, and of preventing her disappearance from seeming like an elopement to the people in the neighbourhood, for which reasons the

notices had perforce to be couched in so guarded a form that they were of little use in catching the eye of the person for whom they were designed, even had she been capable of reading newspapers or anything else at that time ; while, owing to the detective's instructions leading him to chiefly concentrate his attention on the south side of London, whereas poor little Hetty's wandering feet had early carried her across the river, and travelled westward, his researches proved, if anything, even more futile.

But though the vicar was thus occupied on a seemingly hopeless quest, hunting high and low, visiting even workhouse infirmaries and mortuaries in the search for his lost sweetheart, and haunted in all places and at all hours by the vision of the little frightened figure, with its white, unhappy face, wandering homeless and penniless among the thousand pitfalls and horrors of the London streets, it must not be supposed that he neglected either his parish or the widowed and bereaved woman who had never needed his kindness and services more sorely.

It was an unhealthy season, with much rain and little bracing frost and cold, so that the vicar was in more than usual request among his sick and poor parishioners ; but if some of these missed Esther's sunshiny ministrations on their own account, they found no additional cause for doing so in any slackness on their clergyman's part, or for guessing how acutely he on his side missed her too.

Some among them, indeed, said that "Parson had never worked harder or seemed more kindly and sympathising-like with them," and even Mrs. Pentreath

felt inclined at times to forget that her nephew had any special interest in the girl whose loss she herself bemoaned so frequently, or any cause for resentment against the young man to whose defence and encouragement he devoted so many willing if fruitless hours.

Ernest, however, took the matter differently. Since his committal for trial he had lost all his bravery and defiance, and become even more depressed than his circumstances, bad as they were, seemed to warrant; saying openly that if it were not for his mother he had almost rather the charge had been for murder instead of manslaughter, as then it would be all over with him the sooner, and scoffing with dreary cynicism at the efforts to hunt up evidence in his favour when, as he said, none such was forthcoming.

"If those railway people wouldn't recognise me in the beginning they aren't likely to do so now, such a haggard wretch as I've grown in these weeks," he said bitterly. "And as for the home folks, what's the use of making them perjure themselves for me? Don't I tell you I didn't *want* them to know I was in the house? Why, I was so sore and savage that when I got to the door I had ten minds not to go in at all; and it was only the remembering that my mother and Hetty were out, and that, therefore, I couldn't be bothered with their questions and small-talk, that made me do so. A latch-key isn't a noisy thing, and our hall is carpeted like a drawing-room. I don't suppose for a moment that the servants heard me, and I was glad they didn't at the time, for I couldn't stay. The whole cursed affair was next door to ruin for me in

any case; but I thought if I could manage to coax or bully Hollis into some sort of apology and retractation before it had time to get abroad, I shouldn't be obliged to leave the service at any rate. As things are at present, I'd just as soon be hung as not, and I wish you'd tell my people not to bother about me. I suppose the poor mother—God help her!—can't avoid doing so; but after all, my cousin George will be a much better son to her than I've been. She spoilt *me*."

"Your cousin is in too much trouble himself to be very cheering for her at present; though I must say he bears up under it in a very manly way," said Mr. Lorton. "I suppose you know that the young lady he was engaged to has disappeared?"

"The young lady! Who? Not——"

"The one who lived with your mother—Miss Mavors."

"Hetty Mavors! But—good God! what do you mean? Disappeared! I don't understand you."

The lawyer told him very quietly the facts of the case as he had heard them himself, and certainly the effect upon Ernest was startling. He could hardly rest until the next visit from his cousin, and when the latter came plied him with such eager questions that George Hamilton was almost compelled to tell him the whole story.

Briefly as he did it, however, and without comment, there was something in the very intensity of his self-repression which told its own story of what his feelings were on the subject, and Ernest struck his hand against the prison grating and groaned in late and unavailing remorse.

"It was all my doing," he said, "every bit. The poor child never gave me a scrap of encouragement after the mother showed she didn't like it. It was I who wouldn't let her alone; but I thought she really did like me in her heart, and of course it never entered my head that she could be in love with you."

"Of course not," said the vicar, dryly, and was too generous to add more. It was no time for rebuking the egotism which had become second nature in the man before him.

"It was her telling me so, and that she had never cared a hang for me, that riled me. A man doesn't like to feel he has been making a fool of himself; and when I had hood-winked the mother and got up before daylight on a beastly winter's morning, just for the sake of meeting a girl and walking home with her, I did think she'd have been at least flattered and grateful instead of ordering me off as if I'd been a chimney-sweep. All the same I oughtn't to have bullied the child and behaved like a coarse brute to her; and I did—I own it. I wonder she didn't tell you."

"So do I," said the vicar. His face had flushed a little and the fingers of his right hand were clenched tightly into the palm; but he kept his self-command.

"She did threaten to complain to the mother. It was that that made me so mad; but I suppose, after all, she was too kind-hearted to do it when she heard I was in this trouble."

"I suppose so, but, by your leave, Ernest, my aunt must know the whole truth at present."

"As soon as you like. You can tell her her own over-suspiciousness was at the bottom of the whole

business, and that I'll forgive her for it as soon as I can forgive myself. I wonder though—upon my soul, George, I do—that you can speak to either of us while you don't even know where she is."

The vicar drew a long breath. "We won't discuss that now," he said, quietly; and so went away. With all his efforts at charity and self-control it was rather difficult to maintain either at that moment.

CHAPTER XV.

ON TRIAL FOR HIS LIFE.

“**A**T the Central Criminal Court, before Chief Justice Braby, Ernest Pentreath, captain in Her Majesty’s —th regiment, on a charge of manslaughter, for shooting Major James Hollis, late of the same regiment, with a pistol.”

So, in brief, read the announcement published in a score of newspapers, repeated on many scores of posters, and read—God knows! by how many scores of curious or idle people, with much pleasure at the prospect of something rather more interesting than the ordinary cases of vulgar commonplace murder among the lower orders; read also, with such shrinking, such mental anguish and shame, by the few most nearly connected with the prisoner in question, as those idle ones would hardly care to know, even if they had the power to do so.

The three weeks which were to elapse between the magistrate’s examination and the next sittings at the Old Bailey were over. Christmas, the saddest, wofulest Christmas that had ever dawned on the little household at Kew, had come and gone. It was now the second week in January, and in all this time no trace of Hetty had been discovered, and no further evidence in support of Captain Pentreath’s statement had come to light.

It was not that time or trouble had been spared in the search for either. Mr. Lorton, indeed, had hardly left a stone unturned in the energy of his quest after corroborative evidence for the defence ; but the results were so slight as scarcely to repay him for his trouble, while the vicar, though neither ill-success nor heart-sickness availed to diminish the ardour of his quest, was no whit nearer to the end of it than on the morning when he first heard of Hetty's disappearance three weeks ago.

And now the day for the trial had come, a raw, bleak day, with occasional gleams of sunlight, pale and wintry as all else, piercing the heavy slaty masses of clouds which rolled up from the north-west, and casting a strange white gleam down on the streets where shivering people passed and re-passed, hurrying for the sake of warmth, and drawing closer round them the garments they wore—furs or rags, fustian or broad-cloth—in an attempt to keep out the bitter wind which swept round every corner and made little whirlwinds in the centre of every crossing.

But if it was bleak and dreary in the street, where the sunbeams had full play, it was bleaker and drearier still in the largest of the courts of the Old Bailey, where the case which was exciting such public interest was to be tried ; and where not even those fitful sun-rays could avail to brighten the ghastly dinginess of the white-washed walls, the faded red canopy with its golden blazonings over the judge's seat, or the greasy blackened deal of the desks and benches : still less—ah ! far less—that grim, railed off place on which the eyes of all those gathered there would be

concentrated throughout the day — the prisoner's dock.

The case had already begun. The judge, a solemn ponderous-looking man, whose severe glance seemed in itself to forbode no good to the guilty, was seated on the bench, with, beside him, the sheriff, gorgeous in black velvet and glittering chain; and beyond, a group of stylishly-dressed people, elegant women with fans and smelling-bottles, and languid, fashionable men, some of them so-called "friends" of the Pentreaths; but brought to the seats awarded them on the bench by just the same vulgar curiosity, the same thirst for excitement, as that moving the lowest of the general public who filled the high gallery opposite, and pressed forward with unwashed faces and greedy eyes to get a glimpse of the tall, slight, young fellow with the pale face and fair moustache, who stood there with head erect and folded arms, more like a soldier on parade than a prisoner standing forth for trial in a felon's dock.

But though he was trying to carry it off well, and though he succeeded to the admiration of those who were watching him, it was a difficult task; and, despite all his efforts, his glance would wander from the judge's table, on which he had first fixed it, to the counsel for the prosecution, already launched upon his opening speech, and the close-packed rows of barristers' wigs behind and on either side of him, with, prominent among them, his own counsel, Sir James Haycroft, leaning back with half-closed eyes, as though too languid to be even kept awake by his opponent's eloquence; to the jury on whose judgment—or want

of it—his whole fate was to depend ; and to that other row of privileged faces up there behind the barristers, among which were certain of Major Hollis's relations and friends and the Guelder Lodge servants, and, at the extreme end, his cousin George Hamilton, conspicuous by his Roman collar, and clerical dress, no less than by the grave intensity of his expression as he stood immediately behind, and as though supporting, an elderly lady habited in deep mourning, and with head bowed so low that only the white hair and piteously wrinkled brow were visible even to those nearest to her.

Mrs. Pentreath had persisted in being present ; but the sight of her was too much for her son. His lip quivered, and his face, which had gradually flushed to fever-heat under the opposing counsel's lofty and impassioned denunciation, turned as white as death. He looked away again directly.

The speech for the Crown was coming to an end at last. In stern and scathing language the learned serjeant had drawn a brief sketch of the prisoner's previous life, adverting to the general looseness of his habits, the want of honour conspicuous even in his vices, and the continued and unbridled indulgence in his passions ; all leading up to and preparing the minds of the audience for that disgraceful scene at the club, where, as the serjeant expressed it, "one honourable man, strong in the feelings of a soldier and a gentleman, had stood boldly forth in defence of the sanctity of home-life against the wanton boastings of a libertine ;" after which outburst, and after recounting the threats used by Captain Pentreath in passing through the club

hall—threats as to which, he observed, nearly a dozen witnesses could be produced—he went on to the discovery by the landlady of poor Major Hollis's body, and of her encounter in the passage with the prisoner, whose subsequent recognition by Colonel Patterson, together with the words used by that officer, had led to his arrest and detention for the crime which only a few hours previously he had sworn, and repeatedly sworn, to commit.

“And who among you, gentlemen,” cried the learned serjeant, his voice rising to almost indignant appeal, “will dare after such evidence, to say that he did *not* commit it, but rather that, despising the entreaties of his friend who, as will be shown you, endeavoured but in vain to induce him to go home and think no more of the slight he had received, he proceeded to Albion Street, where Major Hollis resided, and then and there deliberately provoked another quarrel, ending in the fatal manner before described? Gentlemen, I do not say that the prisoner entered the house, having in his mind a fixed intention to bring about that end. Far be it from me to exaggerate in any way the guilt of one whose criminality, as you will soon see, has already been so amply established; or to lend any additional blackness to a case which the prisoner, if he have any feelings left, must, however it terminates, deplore to the end of his life: a life which, had this charge been urged in a more vindictive spirit, might have found a fearful and ignominious termination almost at its very outset. But we have to look at facts, at the nature of the people concerned in them, and at the circumstances connected with them; and when we

review these, when we see this young man challenging and threatening to shoot his brother officer, besides uttering other vengeful denunciations against him, for an insult which, however well deserved, would, unless retracted, go far to ruin his subsequent career in the service to which he belonged; when we hear him declaring that that insult must be retracted or paid for in the life-blood of the man who had inflicted it upon him; and when a couple of hours afterwards we find that very man lying dead in his own parlour, shot through the head and weltering in his gore; when we see the pistols on the table, the open pistol-case, the absence of any sign of robbery or other disturbance suggesting the presence of a stranger; more than all, when we find actually present on the spot, detected, indeed, in the very act of escaping, and in such a state of terror and agitation as to be almost incapable of answering or giving any account of himself whatever, the very individual of whom we have been speaking, what can we, and, gentlemen of the jury, what *must* we think but that he, and no other person, committed the deed for which he now stands before you? True, no weapon was found upon his person. True, those that were found have since been proved to belong to the deceased; facts which are extremely fortunate for the prisoner in bearing out the merciful assumption of the prosecution that the fatal affair was the result of a duel, and not a cowardly and revengeful murder. But even in countries where duelling has been practically legalised, as it never has been in this, these sanguinary encounters are fenced round with a code of rules and provisions preventive, if not absolutely exclusive, of any pos-

sibility of foul play or treachery; and gentlemen, it is my duty—my painful duty—to remind you that in this duel no such rules or preventives were observed; that it had neither seconds nor witnesses, and that though, from the circumstances already described, it may be charitably assumed that Major Hollis was willing as a gentleman and a soldier, to afford his adversary that revenge for his wounded honour which the latter exacted, yet—as must not be forgotten—his own pistol was not discharged; neither is there the slightest evidence to show that he had any intention of discharging it, while the medical evidence goes indubitably to prove that from the nature and direction of the death-wound, the unfortunate gentleman must have been taken at a complete and most unfair disadvantage by the person who inflicted it.”

The learned counsel sat down at last after a brief but eloquent peroration, during which one lady fainted in court, and several burst into tears; and the witnesses were summoned,

The first to be brought into the box were those connected with the club quarrel, and their evidence—which we already know—was so uniform, and so marked by an entire absence of animosity towards the prisoner whom it so terribly incriminated—Lieutenant Carstairs indeed being moved almost to tears in his reluctance to bear witness to his friend's threats or to his obstinacy about returning home—that Sir James Haycroft hardly cross-examined at all, and the case began to look very black for the defence.

The landlady made it no better. Her evidence we are also acquainted with; and though Sir James handled

her pretty severely, especially as to whether the prisoner's face had been turned *to* or *from* Major Hollis's room when she first saw him, and also as to his dress and general appearance, he failed to shake her testimony in any material degree; and she went down in a state of triumph strongly in contrast to the pained and serious demeanour of the officers who had preceded her.

The doctor's evidence was a longer and much more important matter, involving many technical details, and exciting intense interest, as it was known that on his testimony the case for Captain Pentreath's defence would be built up. Sir James Haycroft, indeed, woke to his work with a will at this point, and by a quick fire of questioning and cross-questioning, showed the line that he was going to take, *i.e.*, that Major Hollis's death was purely accidental, being caused by the fact of his pistol going off while he was cleaning or examining it. Having extracted from the witness an admission, not only that this might have been the case, but that there was nothing in the appearance or position of the wounds to make it in any way improbable: having, by aid of a pistol which he held in his hand, and a plan of the room showing its shape and size, and the exact position of the body with respect to the fireplace and table, demonstrated how, after being discharged, the fatal weapon might have been jerked out of the hand of the deceased as he fell backward, and so have been lodged in the grate where it was found, he put on his most solemn manner, and appealed to the witness to tell the jury, on his oath, as an unprejudiced observer, whether, had there been no quarrel at the club; or even had the prisoner been proved to have been with friends from the time of its

occurrence, he, the doctor, would have hesitated before accepting the theory above set forth as the cause of death, in place of seeking any other explanation, such as murder or the like.

The witness said, "Certainly not. I should have thought it the most natural one," and seemed about to add something more, but was instantly stopped with:

"Thank you. That is all that is necessary, and I am much obliged to you."

The counsel on the other side was up again in an instant, however, and put the poor doctor through his facings anew, but with little effect beyond proving the learned serjeant's previous statement that the shot, if fired by the prisoner, must have been discharged at murderously close quarters, the powder having singed the deceased officer's whisker and coat-collar; a point which produced the passionate exclamation from the prisoner of "Is it likely!" and the incident was over.

This had been the most exciting bit in the day's proceedings, and what followed—the examination of the two cabmen and of the servants from Guelder Lodge—was not particularly interesting to the general public; while poor old Hickson's extreme reluctance to say anything at all, and Mowcher's persistent attempts at shuffling, rather darkened the case for the prisoner than improved it. And with this the case for the prosecution closed, and the court adjourned for lunch, it being then past two o'clock.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE VERDICT.

WHEN the court re-assembled that afternoon, the crowd, both inside and out, was so great, and the interest manifested in the proceedings so little abated, that, at first sight, it seemed as if not one of those who had mustered to hear the reading of the indictment and the opening speech were absent from what was felt would prove the closing act of a drama whose issues were of such terrible importance to the actors most nearly concerned in it.

This was a mistake, however, and while the process of counting the jury was being gone through, and the barristers were flocking into their places: while some people were wondering what sort of speech Sir James Haycroft would make for the defence, and deciding that it could not be expected to come up to that for the Crown, seeing what an unfortunate case he had in hand; and that, though he had done more for the prisoner than could have been expected in making so much out of that doctor's evidence, he could not but feel he was playing a losing game; while others were even beginning to speculate on what the sentence would be, or to whisper to one another that if it were true, as had been hinted, that there were really no witnesses worth naming for the defence, Sir James might think it

more politic to call none at all; and in that case they would be out in time to get some tea before dressing for dinner—at this time it became apparent to a few that the elderly lady in deep mourning, whom curious fingers had long since pointed out as “the prisoner’s mother,” was no longer in the seat she had occupied.

It was true. All through that cruel speech of the prosecuting counsel, and the subsequent examination of witnesses, Mrs. Pentreath had borne up with a patience and resolution which surprised even her nephew; never speaking or moving, and only once making a slight negative gesture with her head when, at some particularly trying part, the vicar bent down and gently urged her retiring; but immediately after the doctor gave that favourable answer to the leading question put to him, George felt a sudden and heavy pressure against his knee; and, looking down, saw that his aunt had fainted.

She was quickly and quietly removed—so quietly indeed, that the incident did not attract the prisoner’s notice at all: and, being taken into the air, was speedily restored to consciousness; but her strength had received a severe shake, and if it had needed more than the urgent entreaties of those about her to induce her to remain for the remainder of the trial in the room set apart for witnesses, it was supplied by a message from her son conveyed to her by Mr. Lorton.

“Beg my mother, as she loves me, not to stay for the rest of it. You must see how it will end; and the one thing I couldn’t bear would be for her to be there, and see it too.”

She was not there, therefore, when Sir James began

his speech—a very different one truly to that of the learned serjeant whose turn it now was to lean back and contemplate his finger-nails, or shake his wigged head in pitying severity over any point which he wished to emphasise as more than usually weak.

In bluff and hearty tones, just touched with indignation, as one who had been a boy himself, and had boys of his own, the eminent gentleman began by repudiating altogether the description of his client as given by the opposing counsel. That young man, he said, had been described (and he hoped the jury would look at him and see whether the description seemed likely to be a true one) as a libertine, a defamer of women, a liar, and a cowardly and treacherous murderer. Well, he thought the heaping up of epithets was always a mistake as, though there was certainly a proverb, "If you throw plenty of dirt, some of it is sure to stick," there was also a chance that if you threw too violently you might overshoot the mark altogether. For his part, therefore, without attempting to make a saint or an Admirable Crichton out of his client, he would simply say, that a young man who had served his Queen and his country with honour for nearly ten years, against whose character for uprightness and honesty in every transaction, whether of business or play, there rested not the slightest shadow; and whose kindness of heart and popularity among his fellow men and servants had been so touchingly manifested that day by their reluctance to give evidence against him—such a young man could hardly be the savage, dishonest, and cowardly wretch described by the learned serjeant. Of course he had his faults, "as what young man," cried Sir

James, "has not? Doubtless he has been too susceptible to feminine charms. Doubtless he has flirted, as soldiers will; perhaps, at times, may not have been quite as reticent respecting his flirtations as a cooler or more practised libertine might have been; but this last is an assumption only, resting on nothing but the deceased gentleman's accusation; and, though far be it from me to cast blame on one who was also a gallant officer, and with regard to whom we may quote the saying, *De mortuis nil nisi bonum*, still it must be remembered that even the worthiest are liable to error, especially in matters of hearsay, and that in this matter, he gave the prisoner no opportunity to explain or right himself. Before a crowd of people, in a public room, he offered this young man the grossest insult one man can offer another, and coupled it with a still more insulting accusation. The prisoner is proud and high-spirited. He lost his temper, and threatened his defamer in return in hot and violent language. Friends however, interfered, and he was induced to leave the club, and even to allow one of them to accompany him for a considerable portion of the way on his homeward route. Unfortunately—most unfortunately for the prisoner—that friend did not go the whole way with him, and so did not see him into the train which, as we contend, was actually carrying him many miles out of London at the very time the fatal shot which caused the death of the deceased was being fired.

"But in remembering the evidence of this witness as to the prisoner's violent expressions of wrath at the injury he had received, we must also bear in mind his

own independent testimony given in these words, which you have before you, *I never thought Pentreath meant half what he said; and I made sure he would go home, or I shouldn't have left him.* And now, gentlemen, comes that part of my story in which we can only deal with assumptions. The learned counsel for the Crown has given you his assumptions; and has asked you to convict, on purely circumstantial evidence, this young man before you. He has constructed a plausible and elaborate story to account for a mysterious and deplorable event; but, gentlemen, there are two sides to every story, and if the prisoner's mouth were not closed, and he could go into that box, he would tell you a story, less sensational perhaps, less eloquently worded, but more natural, more in accordance with the character, however faulty, which I have just shown you, and in telling it you he would have at least as much right to claim your credence as any other honourable man in a similar position.

"Gentlemen," said Sir James, "in his name I claim that right now, and I ask you to listen to me;" and so dropping his voice, went on to give the story of Ernest Pentreath's visit home, of his return journey, his arrival at Major Hollis's lodgings in time to hear the landlady's shriek at discovering the body; and of his natural consternation at finding the man with whom he had come to right himself lying dead at his feet, past either apology or explanation: his hasty threats of vengeance painted forth upon a bloody canvas by the hand of God!

The learned counsel then reverted to the doctor's evidence, both as to the possibility of death having been self-inflicted and of the probable time of its

occurrence, and comparing that time with the hour of its discovery, asked the jury whether it was likely that the prisoner would have remained there all that period alone with his victim without even going near, or touching the latter, so as at least, to make sure that life was extinct, in which case his hands or clothing must inevitably have acquired some spots or stains of blood from the quantity which flowed from the deceased.

Going back further still, he recalled the words of Major Hollis in answer to the prisoner's challenge, "I shall be ready for you whenever you send to me" and stating that he should call another witness to testify to other words to the same effect uttered by deceased before leaving the club, he went on to suggest that the gallant officer, carrying out this train of thought, might naturally, on his arrival at home, have got out his pistols to examine them, and either in doing so, or in the act of loading, might have touched the trigger, and so in one second caused his own death instead of that of the prisoner before them.

"Gentlemen," said Sir James, very gravely, while so still was the court that a pin might have been heard to fall, and an usher, who came in with a note for Mr. Lorton, almost let it drop under the volley of angry glances directed at him, "gentlemen, you may tell me that these are mere presumptions, and I grant it; but what is the entire case for the Crown but a presumption also? They have admitted that if the prisoner was really at Kew at the time he specifies he could not have committed the crime of which he stands accused; but in casting scorn by anticipation on his denial, and calling

on us to bring direct evidence in proof of it, they forget that the burden of disproof lies with them; that the law, despite of what has been said in a greater assembly than this, does, '*not* demand a victim'; and that if with all their formidable array of witnesses—an array I shall not attempt to emulate—they can only bring forward such circumstantial——”

He was interrupted. Immediately on receiving the note above-mentioned Mr. Lorton had manifested much excitement of manner, and had hurried out of court. His departure excited little attention, however; that of the whole audience, including the prisoner, whose now pale and haggard face showed only too plainly how the long strain of suspense was telling on him, being fixed on the speaker, who, as most there felt, was fighting what he knew to be a losing cause. The solicitor now returned, however, and reaching up to Sir James, put a folded paper in his hand, accompanying the action by a few whispered words.

The effect of them was immediately apparent. The eminent counsel took the paper and glanced over it—an almost momentary glance, accompanied by no apparent change of countenance, or any other expression of emotion; but when, after barely a minute's pause he resumed his speech, it was felt, not by one or two, but by every soul in that assembly, that a subtle change had come over it, and one for which no one, not even he himself, had been prepared.

“Gentlemen,” he said, abruptly, “I was reminding you that the prosecution have brought forward circumstantial evidence only, and have attempted to strengthen it by a cloud of witnesses. I shall not imitate them. I shall

call one witness only, and on her evidence, which is neither presumptive nor circumstantial, I shall leave my case, and leave it with perfect confidence as to your decision, in your hands. Call *Esther Mavors*."

There was a little stir in court, something like a smothered exclamation from that corner where the vicar still held his watchful position; and the prisoner was seen to start violently and change colour, looking about him with an almost bewildered expression as though the name uttered was that least expected in the world by him; but already it had been repeated by the usher, and next moment there was a movement among the crowd which wedged every available passage, as though someone was trying to make her way through it, and a slender, childish figure being half lifted, half assisted into the witness-box stood there, turning a pale and terrified face upon the judge and jury.

Hetty's face, indeed! But so changed, so sharpened and wasted by pain and sickness that those who loved it best would hardly have known it, with the bright liquid eyes grown unnaturally large, with hollows in the delicate temples, against which the soft curls clustered with such childish grace, with the lines of her black frock hanging loosely over the frail, shrunken figure, she looked the very ghost of herself, and a ghost so small, so shadowy and youthful as to provoke a kind of pitying gasp from most of those who looked upon her.

Yet though there was no tinge of colour in the small sweet face, whose timid, wistful expression moved many a heart to compassion, and though she trembled so exceedingly that but for having hold of the rail she

must have fallen, Hetty had not lost her self-possession. Her voice was quite audible as she took the oath, repeating the solemn words after the clerk slowly and clearly as a child giving a message it has tried conscientiously to learn; and her clear truthful gaze never wandered once from the person addressing her, or seemed cognisant of any other presence.

Yet the first question Sir James asked her, "Where were you on the night of the 6th of December between ten and eleven o'clock?" would have been enough to make many girls hesitate before the answer Hetty had to give.

"In Captain Pentreath's room."

She had said it—said it audibly; but there was colour enough in her face now where the blood had rushed up in a fiery tide, and, to the surprise of everybody, the prisoner himself interrupted her.

"You were not! *It is not true!*" he cried out, passionately. "My lord, I don't understand this. I——"

But a stern rebuke from the judge silenced him, and a very few more questions—questions put with a tact and discretion which showed Sir James's ability more than all his previous eloquence—led Hetty on to describe how she had woke up that night, and seeing that it was past ten, and that Mrs. Pentreath had not returned, had come down to Captain Pentreath's room to look for a photograph; how, whilst doing so, she had heard his latch-key in the door, and fearing to be caught thus in her night-dress, had taken refuge in the box-closet; how, shut up there, she heard him pacing to and fro and talking to himself in his excitement;

how at last he had gone away, and she had seized the opportunity to fly to her own room.

So kindly and simply, indeed, did Sir James put his questions, and with such an encouraging semblance of there being nothing surprising or compromising in them, that Hetty's trembling grew less violent as she answered, and her voice, which had sunk almost to a whisper after the first words, gained a little in strength; while two at least of her auditors felt a growing relief and comfort which forced a low "Thank God!" from one of them.

The worst, however, was to come. Sir James, who foresaw it all along, had done his best for her, making her tell the whole story clearly and simply, so that, whatever might be to follow, it should have had its full effect beforehand on the judge and jury, and had even forestalled one question which he knew the opposite side would ask, and probably wished to have satisfied himself.

"How is it that you have not mentioned any of this before? Did you not know the importance it would be to the prisoner?"

There was a moment's hesitation, and Hetty's face grew very pale again as she answered, more falteringly than she had yet done:

"I have been ill—very ill—ever since the inquest. This is the first day I have been let go out."

"So I should infer from your appearance," said the counsel, kindly, though he knew she had not answered him. "Indeed, I see you are hardly well enough to be here now, so I will only ask you one more question. Can you swear positively, and without any doubt what-

ever, that the person who entered Guelder Lodge at half-past ten on the night in question, and whom you heard speaking and moving about in the room where you were hidden, was the prisoner now before you ? ”

“ Quite positively. No one else in the house has a latch-key. Besides, I could not mistake his voice and step. *It was he.* ”

“ Thank you. I think, then, I may say, and I appeal to the jury to agree with me, that you have saved the prisoner’s reputation and delivered him from a very painful situation. My lord, I shall call no other witnesses. The case for the defence is an *alibi*, and I claim that we have proved it, unless, indeed, my learned brother wishes to cross-examine this—this little girl”—he said the last words intentionally, and as a final effort to spare her—“ who has come forward in her present state of weakness, and under such trying circumstances, to testify to the truth.”

But his learned brother did wish it—was, indeed, only waiting to pounce upon the witness the moment she was delivered over to him ; and he was on his legs almost before Sir James had sat down, the very different tone of his voice making poor Hetty blanch and shiver all over in advance.

“ You say you have lived five years with Mrs. Pen-treath as her companion. During how much of that time have you known her son ? ”

“ About six months only. He came home from India in August.”

“ Still six months is long enough for two young people, a young man and woman especially, to get tolerably intimate.”

Hetty made no answer.

"Were you intimate with each other?"

"We were very friendly—yes."

"So friendly that you were in the habit of getting out of bed in the middle of the night, and coming downstairs in your nightdress to search for any little things you wanted—photographs or the like?"

For a moment the girl merely looked at him, such a blaze of wounded dignity and disgust in her eyes as even silenced a kind of titter which had begun in the gallery, and provoked someone—a woman too—to cry "Shame!"

"I was not in the habit of doing so. I only did it that once because I wanted the photograph—it was my own—particularly, and I had had no other opportunity of getting it."

"Was the room kept locked then during the day?"

"No, but he might have been there."

"And you could not have asked him for it?"

"No, I had done so, and he would not give it to me."

"Then you were not quite on such friendly terms, after all, as you described just now?"

"Not then."

"And when did these *friendly* terms come to an end?"

"Some little time before. Mrs. Pentreath did not like it."

"Mrs. Pentreath, the prisoner's mother, had observed the intimacy between you, and disapproved of it?"

"Yes."

"Before that had she been friendly to you herself?"

"Oh yes; she always treated me like a daughter."

"In that case she could hardly have disapproved of your having a merely friendly intimacy with her son. Are you certain that it was nothing more; that you were not lovers, in fact; and that this affair of the photograph—one you had given him, I presume—was not a lover's quarrel?"

"No; I never gave it him, and we were never lovers. I have never cared for Captain Pentreath at all except as a friend, and I was very angry indeed when I found he had taken my photograph. I would not allow him to have it."

"You did quarrel then?"

"Yes; he had spoken rudely to me, and I thought he had acted in an ungentlemanly and dishonourable manner. I said I would complain to his mother."

"And did you?"

"No——"

"But instead you persuaded Mrs. Pentreath to leave you at home on a plea of illness, and when she was gone, got up and went down to the prisoner's room in the middle of the night? Are you sure—excuse my asking you the question, but there is a Latin proverb, *Aman-tium irae integratio amore*, with which you may or may not be acquainted—are you sure that you were not expecting his return, that your visit was not for the purpose of making up the quarrel which you already allow——"

The girl lifted her head. Her innocent face was dyed scarlet as though he had struck it a blow, and there were great tears of anguish in her eyes.

"You have no right—it is wicked to ask me that,"

she said, in a smothered tone. "You *know* I thought he was in town for the night; that it was only—only because of that——"

"Mr. Sergeant, is this necessary?" said the judge. He had daughters of his own at home, and one—a little thing she was, about Hetty's age—lying under the turf in Norwood Cemetery with the grass growing over her. "Pray do not exceed your powers."

"My lord, I am not doing so; but this evidence has come upon us by surprise, has been sprung on us as I may say. If it should be true, then, as my learned friend says, the prisoner has established an *alibi*; but to prove its truth it is needful to sift it to the bottom; and to make sure that this witness has not been tempted to invent her story—her very improbable story—from any tender feeling for the prisoner. Still, I have no wish to distress her more than I can help, and will, therefore, pass on to other matters.

He then cross-examined Hetty keenly and closely, as to the position of the furniture in the room; the exact words used by Captain Pentreath; the possibility of her hearing distinctly in the cupboard, where she stated herself to be, and other matters; but these questions Hetty answered with such absolute clearness and simplicity as could hardly fail to impress itself on the audience as the plain, unvarnished truth. Even the learned serjeant felt it, and, leaving that part of the subject, asked her abruptly and almost angrily why, with this knowledge in her mind, she had not spoken out at once, and so saved the prisoner all the disgrace and suspense of the detention he had already gone through. Poor Hetty hesitated and turned two wistful, piteous eyes upon the

bench ; but it was not a case in which the judge could again interfere ; and step by step she was made to tell the whole story of her painful situation with regard to Mrs. Pentreath, her doubts and fears, her desire to do right, the utter absence of anyone to counsel her ; and the natural shrinking from telling a thing which might put her in an invidious light before those who had already misjudged her. Her voice, which had faltered more and more, broke down at the end into actual sobbing, and the tears were rolling over her white cheeks as she said :

“ I know now it was very wrong to go away ; but I thought he would have other witnesses. I did not think it could all depend on me—and I was afraid. But I always meant to come forward if it was necessary. It was my being taken ill that prevented me. I did not even know what the magistrates had decided till a week ago, and then it was too late except for this. I—I am very sorry if I have hurt anybody. I can’t say any more.”

And indeed even the jury intimated that they had heard enough. The case which only an hour before had been going against Captain Pentreath with such deadly persistency was virtually at an end, and without even leaving their box, they pronounced a verdict of acquittal.

Five minutes later the court-house was cleared, the heated, tired crowd were pouring out, and Ernest Pentreath was kneeling at his mother’s feet with her arms locked round him. The vicar had gone at once to break the news to her lest the shock should be too great ; but in doing this he missed something of more

importance to himself. The moment Hetty's evidence was over she had disappeared, and when he hurried back to find her he could only learn that she had driven away in a cab with a tall woman in black who had been waiting for her.

* * * * *

"But I could not bear to see Mrs. Pentreath or *him* again just yet. Oh, George you won't ask me to do so?" Hetty said, piteously, that evening in the little back parlour at the Thompsons', where, pillowed on the hardest of horsehair sofas, and attended by the energetic Jane, who had nursed her all through her illness, she had been lying for the past week till that morning.

It was only about ten days since she had first wakened back into consciousness from the mist of pain and fever which had held her so long; and her first agitated enquiry:

"Where am I? Is the trial over? Oh! *have* they set him free?" was taken for the vain wanderings of delirium by her nurses, and soothed away with a few unmeaning words of acquiescence as one might soothe a child.

As strength came back to her, however, she returned to the subject, and begged so earnestly that she might see the daily papers referring to the time when she was taken ill that they were at last brought to her, when her anguish and distress at finding that her silence had resulted in Captain Pentreath's committal for trial on the charge of manslaughter, nearly brought on a relapse, and undid all the good that doctors and nursing had done for her in the interim. It was then that she confided her troubles to Jane, whose real worth and kind-

heartedness had won her heart from the first, and who more than agreed with her as to the necessity of her atoning for her previous reticence by putting in an appearance at the forthcoming trial, however much that reticence had added to the odium and mortification attached to such a proceeding.

"Of course it will be hard," said the Salvation Captain, "but Life is always hard. It is a battle in which none can take ease; and in shaming yourself you will be on the Lord's side, who chose shame and derision of his own accord. To speak truth I could heartily wish I were in your place. To us who stand around the banner, the sound of hissing is sweeter far than praise; but at any rate I shall be beside you: and after all, what need the hissing matter even to you, when it is but the voice of worldlings whom you have left for ever, and need not even cast eyes upon again!"

"But I am only a worldling too," said Hetty, "and they were not . . . *all* so. Oh! Jane, I am very unhappy." And Jane thought it was sheer weakness and timidity which made the child hide her face on her pillow and sob so bitterly. Poor Esther! was it true indeed that after the ordeal before her she would never cast her eyes upon *one* face again!

After the decision arrived at, however, it may seem strange that the obvious course of communicating with Mr. Lorton as to the new witness in readiness was not pursued; but the true reason for this was after all a very simple one, namely, that the obvious course to educated or practical minds is generally the very one least acceptable to the prejudices of a narrow and uncultured intellect, particularly when the latter is

rendered at once more obscure and more obstinate by old age.

Old Matthew Thompson's besetting weakness was for respectability; and in his eyes police courts were not respectable. He did not know much about them, never (as he proudly vaunted himself) having been inside one in his life; but he considered them as represented by the scum of the population which seethed in the "Potteries" at the back of his house, and by the pages of that peculiarly low journal the *Police News*, which he had once taken from a servant girl's hand and solemnly burnt in his own parlour fire; and the mere idea of such a paper having it in its power to depict a member of his household, his own grand-niece, a scion of that pious and respected family the Thompsons, as standing amid just such a rabble for the sole purpose of calling shame on herself, and making most self-damaging assertions in defence of a carnal and dissolute living soldier, was gall and wormwood to him.

Of course if it must be it must, aye, even if he had to retire from the revered and much-prized eldership of "Little Sion" in consequence. Old Matthew was a just man, and if this officer fellow was innocent of bloodshedding he must not be let swing for it, even for the sake of the Thompsons' respectability; but—there was no hurry! Time enough for Hetty to give her evidence when she knew it was needed; and very likely the Pentreaths had got sufficient witnesses by now to make her testimony superfluous after all. If not there she was, and a little suspense wouldn't do much harm to one who was but a profane and godless pleasure-seeker after all.

So he argued, and little Hetty, weakened as much by illness as by long habits of submission, was forced to give in to his decision and keep silent till almost the last moment when speech was possible, though the nervous agitation and remorse occasioned by such a fiat seriously affected her recovery.

It was, as I have said, little more than the ghost of the once bright and saucy girl which George Hamilton (solely through Jane's notoriety as "the Hallelujah lass of the Potteries") succeeded in tracking at last to its hiding-place; and a very weak and wasted ghost, with not even strength enough to keep the tears from its dark, wistful eyes as it made the appeal above recorded.

The vicar looked down into them very tenderly.

"I don't yet know what I shall ask you," he answered. "Do *you* know what you deserve for leaving me as you did? Hetty, I almost feel as if I never could forgive you."

But as he said it, with his arms round her, and her weary little head pillowed on his breast, it seemed probable that he might do so some day. Poor Hetty tried to plead for herself.

"But you said your promise must be broken, and I thought——"

"You thought all wrong. I meant my promise of keeping our engagement secret, and I told my aunt that very day. Hetty, she wants greatly to see you and ask your pardon."

"Mine! But I ought to ask hers for all I made her suffer. George, will she want me to go back to her?"

"It is no matter if she does, as I want you more,

and mean to have you. Don't look so frightened and unhappy, dear child. If you would really rather stay with these good relatives of yours while you are making up a white gown—I don't like you in black, Hetty, white is prettier, and really more bridal—you may."

Hetty made no answer.

"You see, even as it is, Ernest must leave the army," the vicar said, after a while. "Indeed he has sent in his papers already, and it is almost settled that he and my aunt will travel on the Continent for a while till all this painful affair has blown over. What I have been thinking about at present, however, is something different, namely, whether—I have been offered a living in the lake country, far away in Westmoreland, where there are very high winds—whether those winds would blow my small wife away altogether, or only bring a little colour back into these dreadful white cheeks. What does she think? It is a serious question."

But Hetty answered it without a word at all.

THE END.







